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Death and Other Endings

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Stephen Leonard

B.A. Haverford College, 1995

May, 2010

Merci, ma Dilou, pour ta patience.

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Cult Notes

A guy in his forties, with sharp features and spiky hair, opens the door for me. He says his name is Bob. Guys named Bob can't belong to a cult, I think. He speaks fast, but his voice is soothing.

"I'm glad you came, Vince," he tells me.

I thank him.

"Come on in, Vince," he says.

The building where they live isn't tucked into woods in the middle of nowhere, or on some sort of ranch compound. It's in Midtown Atlanta. I've never heard of any cult owning a mansion in a hip, urban neighborhood.

"Make yourself at home, Vince," Bob says. Bob is like a dentist who keeps saying your name, and you're wondering if it's so you feel at ease, or if it's so he doesn't forget it. Whatever the reason, it's a little annoying, but I kind of like it. He doesn't seem so bad.

The building sits at the corner of Argonne and 10th and faces Piedmont Park. It's a boxy, red-brick mansion cut up into apartments, then bought by a man named Michael John. I've been told that he lives here with nearly two hundred of his followers. They don't say followers, though, and he doesn't call himself their leader.

"Adviser," the girl said when I met her in the park a few weeks ago. "He's our adviser."

The girl's name is Janey, and she's why I'm now sitting in a kind of tearoom on the third floor, overlooking the park. I hear Nirvana's remake of an old Lead Belly song playing somewhere down a hall. Through the window I see a couple bums shuffling down the sidewalk that runs alongside the park. One is pushing a shopping cart full of junk. The other practically

falls off the sidewalk into an oncoming car, which honks at him. He turns and yells something I can't hear, but I can imagine what he's saying. I try to focus my attention on Bob, who is telling me about how he met his wife Molly seven years ago, when he came to live with the Group.

"The Group?" I say, sipping on the Corona that Bob has offered me. He drinks chardonnay. There is no way people in cults drink chardonnay.

"That's what we call ourselves, Vince," Bob answers. "Michael John doesn't believe in labels."

I'm wondering where Janey is when a couple skinny girls who look about 17 walk in, and I forget about Janey.

Both are wearing tight shorts that allow them to show off long, tan legs. One has straight, blonde hair that goes down to her waist, and I wonder if she's ever had her hair cut in her life. The other one holds a picnic basket and wears a tight, yellow tee-shirt. Tiny, firm breasts no bigger than tennis balls seem like they're just waiting for someone to take that tee-shirt off.

Bob introduces the girls. Kim and Kelly. Or Kelly and Kim. I can't remember which is which. They tell Bob they're going down to the park for a while, and they ask if he wants to come. He thanks them but says no. I think I catch Bob's eye lingering a little too long on Kelly's ass when they turn to go. But I could be wrong. It could have been Kim's.

"What's their story?" I ask.

"Just two people like us, Vince. People who need help. People who are blessed to have found the Group, to have found their way to Michael John." Bob smiles. I nod and extend my Corona bottle towards him in a toast.

*

I do what Bob tells me to do. I give two months' notice on my apartment, and while I'm waiting to move to Argonne, as people in the Group call the house, I hang out more and more with people in the Group. Bob assigns a guy named Doug to act as a sort of big brother. Doug is probably 25, a few years younger than I, and I'm disappointed, because I was hoping I could get Janey to "initiate" me. But I still haven't seen Janey, and Doug's not a bad guy. We go for a drink most nights after I get off work, and sometimes he brings others with him. The skinny girls are too young for the bar, I guess, because I haven't seen them since my meeting with Bob in the tearoom. I hope they're at least 18.

Doug is studying architecture at Georgia Tech. He sure doesn't seem like any cult member I've ever read about.

"Wait till you move in," he says one Sunday afternoon at the Three Dollar Café. We're eating wings and are both on our third beer. The Braves are losing to the Phillies on the giant screen, and the smaller overhead TVs are showing other games from around the League. "You'll get a chance to meet Michael John. He is... well, you'll just have to see him for yourself. He's a great man."

Bob walks in with a stunning woman at least three inches taller than he is. Her tan skin is slightly dewy with sweat, and under the neon bar lights, she glows. She has a way of walking, I notice, almost a strut, as if she knows not only how sexy she is, but how smart she is, too. I pray Bob presents her to me as a "welcome to the cult" gift.

"Molly, this is Vince, the guy I've been telling you about," Bob says. "Vince, my lovely wife, Molly."

I stand up from my bar stool and wipe the Buffalo sauce from my hands. I feel Molly's eyes run up and down my body. I am convinced she is attracted to me. After all, I'm nearly as tan as she is, and a couple inches taller.

"You look kind of like Clint Eastwood," she says. "When he was young."

Lines from spaghetti westerns and Dirty Harry movies run through my head, but I resist the temptation to try to be funny. I shake her hand and am surprised by the firmness of her grip. "Nice to finally meet you, Molly," I say.

*

Move-in day arrives, and I can't wait. Life is looking up. I'm meeting beautiful women, having fun with a new bunch of friends. I feel happy for the first time in a long time. Like maybe I've finally found my place. This is what life should be about. If this is a cult, I'm glad to be signing up.

It's a Sunday night when I arrive. Sunday nights are a time when the Group comes together, with no outsiders allowed. I'm excited, because this is my first time seeing what these people are like when they're just among themselves. If things ever get weird, it's got to be on Sunday nights.

I settle my stuff into a small apartment. It's nothing fancy, but I don't need much in the way of material things. The rent I'll pay here is a lot less than I was paying in my last place, and I should be able to put about half my paycheck into the bank. Once I've stuffed my clothes into the little IKEA dresser in my bedroom, Doug leads me down to the basement, where I enter a long community hall-type room with a stage at the far end and enough folding chairs facing it to seat the entire Group. People are standing around tables, drinking, chatting. I recognize some of

them from nights out with Doug and Bob, but a lot of people I've never seen before are also here. I've been hanging out with mostly the younger members, from the looks of it, because in the hall now I see people ranging into their sixties, at least. A few blacks and Latinos mix in with the predominantly white crowd.

I see Molly, Bob's beautiful wife, already seated in the front row, and the skinny girls Kim and Kelly are sitting on the edge of the stage, talking to a couple boys who look as young as they do. Damn. I don't see Janey, and that's kind of weird, because since the day in the park, I haven't seen her or even heard anyone mention her.

In the back of my mind, I can still imagine that maybe this is some kind of cult, and they ate Janey on a recent Sunday night, but that's crazy. Cult members don't eat each other. In fact, all I really know about cults is that usually some insane leader convinces everyone he's Jesus, and for some reason that gives him the right to have sex with 13-year-olds, and eventually he gets caught in some lie or has a run-in with the law, and he has to get everyone to perform mass suicide. Well, as long as I can see that coming, I don't see how I'll get tricked. And besides, everyone here seems pretty smart and not susceptible to some half-rate, pedophile charlatan with a savior complex.

I get a drink, and Doug tells me we should grab some seats, as Michael John should be arriving shortly. We sit down next to a fat guy in an argyle sweater who smells vaguely of tuna.

The room settles down. Everyone has taken a seat. The chatter comes to an end, and I feel like I'm in a movie theater, and the previews are finished, and everyone shuts up for the opening credits. Except nothing's happening on stage. Everyone's just staring at it. I get an eerie feeling, like maybe everyone really is crazy after all.

But I don't want everyone to be crazy. I want them to be normal people who happen to have stumbled upon some sort of guru who really does provide them with "advice" for a better way of life. I realize I don't actually care if I get to have sex with the skinny girls or Bob's wife. As I sit there in the silent hall, staring up at a blank stage, waiting for this guy Michael John, the adviser, to arrive, I just want to feel a little peace.

*

"It's okay, don't worry about it," Doug says afterwards. "It was the same for me, too."

They are all crazy. There is no Michael John. They just sit there silently and watch nothing happen on the empty stage for two hours, and then, just like at the end of a movie, they get up and look at each other, they gather their things, they talk quietly in small groups. They all look incredibly content, like they just saw Gandhi make salt or as if they've received a blessing from Mother Teresa.

Doug tries to convince me that Michael John was there, that he gave this amazing sermon. It bothers me that he uses the word "sermon". Couldn't he just call it a speech? Doug says that Michael John has a gift to speak individually to each person in the room, no matter how many people are present.

"It's like you're having a one-on-one conversation with him, like no one else is there, you know?" he says.

"Uh, no. I'd say it was more of a one-on-none conversation, Doug. Seriously, no one was on the stage."

Doug just smiles. I look around the hall. Everyone has the same weirdly contented smile on his or her face. Okay, I think. It's a cult.

Everyone heads upstairs out of the basement hall, and I follow, wanting to be a follower. I want to be one of the “advised.” Everyone looks so placid. I see Bob and Molly holding hands. The skinny girls appear in deep discussion with one of the younger guys I saw them with before the meeting had begun. I hear one of them – Kelly, I think – say to the boy, “That’s the key, Danny. Let yourself be open to the message, and you’ll find you won’t have to struggle anymore.”

Who are these people?

Doug slaps a hand on my shoulder. “You look like you could use a drink, Vince.”

I don’t want a drink. I just want to get out, to be alone for a while, away from these people who just spent their evening staring at nothing. I do not say this to Doug. There are too many people around, and I’m afraid of how they might react. So, I wait till we’re outside. “I think I’m just going to spend some time by myself,” I say.

Doug squints his eyes together, as if he’s pondering something he just can’t get a grasp on. He runs a hand over his shaved head and says, “You sure? I really think you ought to –”

“I’m sure,” I say, and head across the street into the park. He tries to call after me, but I ignore him. In the park, I walk mid-way across the bridge to the pagoda in the center of Piedmont Lake. I’m all alone for a few minutes.

But not for long. I’m leaning forward against the railing, watching an old woman toss bread crumbs to a flock of ducks gathering by the bank when I hear footsteps behind me.

I turn and see Molly. She’s wearing a sleeveless white dress that cuts off just above her knees. She smiles. “Looking for an explanation?”

“For what?”

“For what you just saw.” She saunters up next to me like she’s on a runway, turns around, and leans her back against the railing.

I chuckle. I sound nervous. I want to sound in control. “What did I see?”

“If I say you saw a miracle tonight, you probably wouldn’t believe me, would you?”

“What did you see, Molly?”

She slides over to a bench in the pagoda and gestures for me to join her, so I sit down next to her. She tells me about how she came to join the Group ten years ago, how she was then lost, with no purpose in life and a string of bad relationships in her past. Since joining, she’s finished college and worked her way up to a management position for a telecom company. And she found love.

“Yeah, Bob seems like a good guy.”

She smiles again, that smile that seems to say, “I know something you don’t.”

“What?” I ask. I feel a chill run through me, and I think I might start to shiver like I used to when I was 14 and talking to girls for the first time.

“It’s not Bob, Vince.”

“You don’t love Bob?” I say, trying not to sound too hopeful that she will declare her love for me.

“Oh, I do,” she answers. I attempt not to show my disappointment. “But I’m talking real, undying love, love for myself and for everybody I come in contact with.”

I have no idea what language she’s speaking. I think she might be talking about religion, or something, or maybe she’s trying to tell me the whole Group practices free love. I’m kind of hoping it’s the latter. But I’m intrigued by the idea of the former. I’m feeling mixed up, and I’m wondering if this is how people get hooked into staying in a cult. Because at some point, they

don't know what to think anymore. Their minds are spinning, and they have to make a choice: either get out or buy in. I wonder if I'm starting to buy in.

She looks at me and I look back at her, examining her perfectly cultivated eyebrows. I have never seen such fine eyebrows on another human being before. I don't know if she's still talking or not, because all I can focus on are these short, black hairs that form thin lines above her chocolate-brown eyes. I notice her tanned forehead has several, nearly undetectable, light-brown freckles, and wrinkles are just beginning to take shape, but I know that they won't look bad on her, that she'll only look smarter and more attractive with age.

She has stopped talking, and she's looking at me funny. We are face to face, only a few inches of air separating our lips. I don't think. I lean in. And she lets me. Her lips are moist and taste like oranges. When she pulls back slowly, I attempt to keep going, and she gives me another smile and says, "I love you, Vince," before standing up, smoothing her dress with her hands, and walking out of the pagoda.

*

I stay because of her. Not because of the camaraderie I feel toward Doug or some of the others. Not because I think my Kim and Kelly fantasy is ever going to be fulfilled. And certainly not because Michael John, the incredible invisible sage, is going to impart life's wisdom to me during the Sunday night stare-fests. I stay because of her.

It's a weird feeling, knowing that you're the only sane one in a house full of mentally disturbed people. I've been at Argonne for three months now. Not much has changed in my life. I leave Argonne every weekday morning and head off to the same job I've had for three years,

selling computer networking systems to businesses. I hang out at night with people from the Group. Things are okay. But I just don't think I'm fitting in.

Bob has taken an active interest in me. I wish his wife would. But while she continues to throw me these smiles that seem to tell me, "I'm thinking of you and me naked," there have been no more kisses in the middle of Piedmont Lake, or anywhere else, for that matter. Bob and I have discussions now, every Wednesday night.

I'm late for our meeting, so I hustle up to the third floor tearoom. He's already sitting in one of the easy chairs looking out on the park. I take a seat near him and glance out toward the place where I kissed his wife. I wonder if he knows, and if he does, would he mind? Maybe I should just ask him. He might give me his blessing, or he might kick me out of the Group, which by this point wouldn't be such a bad alternative.

"You're frustrated, Vince," he says.

I'm not sure how to respond. Is he talking about my inability to get anywhere with his wife? I say nothing.

"It's okay, you know. Michael John asked me to tell you to be patient. You'll see when you're ready to see."

"I kissed Molly," I blurt out.

"I know. It's all right."

He sits there calmly looking out the window, as if I had just told him what we're having for dinner, not that I made a move on his wife. I hate this guy. What's his problem? Why is everyone in this cult so calm all the time? I tell him I just don't understand what's going on. And I tell him I don't believe Michael John exists.

I blurt this out as fast as I had the thing about me kissing his wife. I immediately regret having said it. It's not that I don't want to upset him. It's that I don't want it to be true. I want to believe that Michael John exists. I want Michael John to be there, in living color, every Sunday night. I want to hear whatever it is this guy has to say, and I want to walk out of that basement along with everyone else and feel a sense of renewal, a sense of peace. I don't want to be the only sane guy in the room full of crazies. They're the ones who look so happy, so content all the time. It's not fair. Give me the Kool-Aid. I'll drink it.

"How come you never ask where Janey is, Vince?" Bob asks.

Janey. Now there's someone I haven't thought of in a while. I don't know why. I guess I should be concerned for her. After all, it was this girl Janey, with the green eyes – or were they more a grayish blue? – who first told me about the Group, who first had me visit with some of the Argonne people when we all went out for cocktails in Buckhead one night. She said she couldn't go out with me because she wasn't sure if she was ready yet.

"You all didn't eat her, did you?"

Bob smiles. "Janey's fine. You'll see her in a while."

"Okay," I say. "Where's she been all this time?"

Bob ignores my question. "She has a special gift, one that enabled her to seek you out, Vince. To bring you to Michael John. He's been waiting for you for a long time."

"Well, I've been waiting for him too, Bob. Every Sunday from 8 to 10."

He says nothing. He reaches for his cup of tea and takes a sip. I hear someone enter the room from behind us, and I turn to see my big brother Doug. Doug does not sit down, but rather stands next to Bob's armchair. I look out at Piedmont Park. A woman is gathering up a blanket while a man chases two little children. They seem happy. I bet they don't belong to a cult.

“Look, if you all killed Janey or something in some kind of ritual, that’s your business... I’m sorry for having wasted all your time, and thank you for whatever it was you were trying to do for me. I think I should probably get going.”

I get up to leave, but Doug moves to block my way. He’s slender but muscular, and I’m not sure I could take him and Bob at the same time.

“Janey is with Michael John,” Bob says. “Do you want to see her?”

*

Bob and Doug lead me down to the basement. The house is quiet, and I can hear nothing but the muffled sounds of the people above us on the ground floor. It’s after dinner, and some of the older folks like to hang out in the dining hall and play cards. I can hear laughter and the occasional scrape of a chair on linoleum. In the basement, the folding chairs are neatly stacked in columns against one wall. The stage remains, as usual, bare. I notice a light coming from the doorway which leads backstage. I have never been back there before, and in all our Sunday meetings, I’ve never really taken notice of it, as it has always been dark.

Bob tells me I should go inside, that Michael John and Janey are waiting to see me. I’m sure they’re lying. Obviously someone back there is waiting to kill me. Like they did Janey. I should run. I should bull my way past these two, fly up the stairs and out the front door.

“What do they want with me?” I ask.

“You’ve been here for how long now, Vince?” Bob asks. “Over three months? We’ve put our trust in you, that you’d come around when you were ready. Now, though, it’s time for you to put your trust in us, Vince. You need to see what’s in that room.”

I again contemplate fleeing, but there's some part of me, probably the stupid part, that wants to find out what's waiting behind Door #1. I want Michael John to be there. So I move forward, slowly at first, but as I approach, and the light seems to be getting stronger, I quicken my step. Just before reaching the door, I look back and see the whole Group has taken up position behind Bob and Doug. Molly is at her husband's side. She nods to me, giving me that smile for the last time.

I turn back and step inside. Mirrors run the length of every wall, there is no other furniture, and one light bulb hangs down, burning with white-hot intensity from somewhere overhead. I move to the center of the room and face myself, glancing back and to the side, seeing reflections of reflections of reflections in the hot, bright room. I have left open the doorway leading back to the stage, and through it I can see nothing. It's just a big, black rectangle.

I can feel sweat forming on my brow. What am I supposed to do now? How long do I have to wait for something to happen? Michael John is not here. I'm alone, with the thousands of images of a diminishing me. They mix with the black reflections of the doorway. Some of the black doorways seem to be encroaching upon my doppelgangers, and I feel afraid, but I don't know why.

"This is stupid," I whisper. But I don't leave. Instead, I sit down, Indian-style, in the middle of the room. I look up and notice for the first time that the ceiling is also a great mirror. Though the light bulb's glare should prevent me from seeing the ceiling clearly, I look at myself on the wood-slatted floor, wearing a light-blue V-neck sweater and khaki pants. My black shoes need to be polished. I need to shave, too. I shouldn't be showing up to work unshaven. It's not very professional. I think about my job, and how the reason I don't shave is because I just don't care enough about it. I should quit. I need to find something I like doing. I should go and be a

math teacher, I think. I always liked math. And I have to stop thinking about Molly. She's married to someone else.

My neck hurts from looking up. I move it slowly back and forth, stretch it from side to side and around. The images of me spin wildly when I do this. The heat of that one light bulb seems to be roasting my skin. I wonder if it's possible to get sunburned from electric light.

I'm spinning and I'm burning and I sense something else, the outline of a figure coming in from the darkness of the hall. I think it's going to be Michael John, and I actually feel scared, as if I'm meeting God or something. But it's Janey. I don't recognize her at first. She looks older than I remember her. But I was right about her eyes. They are green. She is wearing tight jeans and a tee-shirt. She's not as slim and innocent as the skinny girls, and she doesn't have that sexy, "I'm in control" look of Molly. She wades in from the blackness and looks down on me.

"Make your choice, Vince," she says. "You need to decide right now whether you're going to stay with us, or whether you want to go."

I stand up and face her. I start to ask a question, but she says, "No. It's time to choose."

This is too weird for me, and I feel kind of pissed. I have so many questions, more than when I entered. And now she wants me to face some kind of leap of faith moment. I want to ask her if she'll go grab a coffee with me, and here she is, telling me I've got to either jump in the deep end, or get the hell out of the pool.

I think back on the last half a year, since I first met Janey in the park. I remember wondering if she was involved in some kind of cult, and I think back on my three months here with the Group, where I've had some laughs, met some interesting people, and the only thing that is like a cult is this whole Sunday night thing where they all stare at nothing. I decide that this isn't a cult. Like Bob told me, these are just people who need help, who are blessed to have

found Michael John. It bothers me, though, that I haven't yet experienced that peace that everyone else has. I haven't seen Michael John, and I'm worried if I stay here, I never will, and while the people are nice and all, I don't think that's enough for me.

Maybe I should stay, and maybe I'll meet Michael John, and he really will prove to be some great adviser. In the heat of the light, with Janey standing in front of me, I imagine for a second what it would be like to stay with her. I wonder if we'd end up like Bob and Molly. I think about the old people here, and I wonder what it'd be like to spend my life at Argonne. They all seem so content, so at peace. I want that.

I decide the Group isn't a cult. I don't really know what it is. But I know I don't believe in Michael John, and weekly fellowship and a group of well-meaning friends just aren't enough for me. Maybe if I stay, I'll eventually find that inner peace that everyone else here seems to have obtained. But I don't want to waste my life trying to find out.

I walk out of the room. Janey lets me. The others in the hall, they somehow know already that I'm not one of them. I walk past them as if I'm on a packed city street, wending my way through a crowd. It's like they're already complete strangers to me, and I to them. Except Molly. As I pass her, she whispers, "I love you, Vince."

I wish to God I could feel the same.

Far from Venice

I was eight and still playing dress-up in my mother's clothes. She was downstairs, and I had sneaked into her walk-in closet, planting myself on the plush, beige carpet surrounded by her shoes, all lined up in neat order, toes pointing outward. I imagined that ghosts stood in those shoes, guarding her dresses and her sweaters. A pair of navy blue stiletto heels grew to a femme fatale version of my mother, complete with shimmery evening dress and a cigarette dangling from her ruby lips. Clunky wooden clogs with butterflies on the buckles evoked an image of her in an oversized, sloping straw hat and white-rimmed sunglasses that hid her eyes, a plain, blue, cotton sundress draped over her boyish frame. While this slideshow of my mother's past lives ran through my head, I rummaged through drawers, reaching toward shelves well outside my grasp.

She never liked it when I played in her closet.

"Katie," she had said on more than one occasion, "I don't want you going through my private things."

I couldn't help wondering what secrets my mother might be hiding from me, so I kept on searching. A footstool enabled me to pull open the top drawer of a heavy oak dresser, the dark brown wood out of place amid so many bright pinks and blues and yellows. Stretching my arm upward, I reached inside, my pudgy hand fumbling around for whatever it could find. My fingers brushed against textured paper, and I recognized the feel of peeling stamps affixed to envelopes. Stretching past the letters, I came in contact with something soft and feathery. I stood on my toes to gain another inch or two, enough to drag the thing over the scattered pile of letters and to the edge of the drawer, until I could pull it out.

It slipped from my hand, floating like a leaf to the floor. I hopped off the footstool and picked up a black mask with magnificent blue feathers radiating outward. Holding it to my face, I peered through it at the mirror attached to the closet door. The mask made me feel elegant and beautiful for the first time in my life. For a fleeting moment, I thought I understood something new about my mother. I was still years away from learning about her past, about her life before she met my father. She had stayed in Italy after World War II, trading in her nurse's uniform for a pair of jeans and a backpacker's life. For five years, she rode a motorcycle around the rebuilding country. She had skied in the Alps and attended private masked balls in Venice and taken lovers. My grandmother told me once that when my mother finally returned in 1950, she could not remember her English and kept prefacing every sentence with shoulder shrugs and a puckering of her lips. By the time I was born three years later, she was still beautiful, but she had become plainly American, wearing a plastic apron and smile, the '50s housewife's armor. Her adventures were reduced to activities -- banal, childish things like tracing my hand into the shape of a turkey for a Thanksgiving decoration, or creating Halloween costumes out of papier-mâché, yarn and pieces of leftover pink taffeta. Although I knew she loved me, I would understand only with age how a part of her was withering.

"Good day to you, sir," I said to my reflection in the mirror, affecting a funny voice I had heard in an old Marx Brothers movie one Saturday morning.

"Good morning, madame!" I replied to myself, this time in a deep voice that I wanted to sound like my father's. "Would you like to go for a ride on my horse?"

When my mother entered her bedroom, I lowered my make-believe conversation to a whisper. By the time the phone rang, I had strung several of her necklaces around my neck, and I'd imagined that my handsome courtier had invited me to a horseman's ball, which in my mind

meant that everyone danced while on horses. I continued to gallop-dance around the little walk-in closet, watching myself in the mirror.

I could tell my mother was not talking to my father. She sounded too happy. She was always less polite with my father on the line. She sighed more and articulated less. "Mm-hmm," she said a lot. "Mm-hmm, well I didn't have time, so you'll have to bring something back. I don't know, just not hamburger." Or, "Again? You know, she barely recognizes you anymore." There was always this sense of exasperation, of patience spinning counterclockwise down a drain.

When she spoke with someone about fixing the roof, or if someone called to try to sell her a magazine subscription, she held a sort of false cheer, the phone cord a conduit for politeness and lies. But this call, I knew, was not from a salesman, either.

"Stop!" she said, giggling. It was rare when she giggled, and I liked it. She sounded a little like me. She made a funny kind of soft moan, as if she had just spooned a bite of chocolate ice cream into her mouth. The bounce of bedsprings meant she'd fallen onto her bed. She spoke in a low voice, and the quieter she was, the quieter I became. Somewhere in the middle of my horse dance, I stopped and devoted my attention to the conversation.

I heard the bedsprings again. Her makeup case, full of brushes and pencils, lipsticks and eyeliners that were strictly off-limits to me, sat at a dressing table by the bed, and I could hear her pulling open its tiny drawers as she continued whispering to the caller.

I don't remember what was said, but I remember how she said it. A gleeful laugh punctuated every breathy sentence. I rubbed a finger against the mask's velvety contours and imagined a younger, happier version of my mother. The thought triggered something in me, and I laughed out loud. She went silent for a moment. A quick word preceded the sound of the plastic receiver being slammed back onto the phone's base. I knew what was coming next, and I moved

to the back of the closet, raising the mask to my eyes, as if by doing so she wouldn't recognize me.

The door swung open. Through the mask's eyeholes my mother appeared, a look of surprise across her face. "Where did you find that, honey?" she asked after a moment.

"In the drawer," I said, pointing toward her dresser. "I'm sorry, Mamma. Are you mad?"

"Angry, dear. Mad means crazy," she said absentmindedly, slipping down to the floor. She crossed her legs Indian-style and reached for the mask, plucking it from my hand. A smile stretched upon her lips, and I recognized that faraway look she sometimes got. She brushed her fingers against the feathers of the mask.

"Are you angry?" I asked.

She looked up at me as if just remembering I was in the closet with her. "You shouldn't always be hiding yourself away in here."

My mother stood up again in a hurry. Still holding the mask, she slipped back out of the closet. I followed her and paused at her makeup case. She sat down on the bed and crossed her legs. She raised the mask to her face and now looked directly at me. I felt as if a complete stranger had just entered the room. I looked away, running a finger over a row of colored pencils that looked not too different from those I had used to draw pictures that were now stuck to our refrigerator downstairs.

"Your mask is pretty," I whispered, turning a sheepish eye back toward her.

She stared through me while a joyless smile flickered across her lips. "Yes, it is," she replied. "Now, you go play in your room. I have to call your father back."

"That wasn't Daddy," I replied.

Her eyes focused in on mine for a moment before she turned away, dropping the mask on the bed. I lingered at the makeup case, waiting for her to respond. Realizing that neither of us knew what to say next, I walked out of the room and left my mother to call back whoever was waiting on the other end of the line.

August Mabee's Last Good Story

The author was old. He rarely left the tower anymore, but for the new book they thought it would be a good idea. The stories were old, too, fragments taken from a life he was starting to forget, and he knew they were not his best. He did not wear his costume, the familiar stark-white shirt and bowtie, the creased dark pants, the black golf cap. When he entered the auditorium wearing jeans and a sweater, some in the crowd gasped and whispered to their neighbors. He could not hear what they were saying, and the applause started a moment later anyway, but he knew they were wondering who this rumpled man near death was. It could not be the great writer August Mabee, the man whose name had been affixed to the bases of statues, to college syllabi, and to a barrel-chested style of writing. It could not be that the man who had made a career of writing about death, the signature end to so many of his short stories, was finally succumbing like one of his invented heroes. He was too great for death.

He took the podium and placed his left palm on its top, feeling the polished wood. With his right hand he removed his glasses and replaced them with the pair for reading. He coughed. A water bottle, room temperature, along with a tall, thin glass, stood waiting in the shelf under the podium top. The bottle top was already unscrewed, as per his request. He removed the cap and poured half the bottle's contents into the glass while he surveyed the crowd.

It was hard to reconcile his feelings for those he saw before him. He knew almost none of them, but they all knew him. Most had probably read a novel or two of his, more likely some of his short stories when they were in high school. Some had read not one word of his writing, and others, he was sure, had read nearly all.

In the front row were the editor, and the agent, and the marketer. The editor was new, a young woman with long, black hair and glasses she hid behind. She was not pretty, but he found himself continually wishing she were. Perhaps if she were prettier, he could forgive her for being so pseudo-intellectually pretentious. The agent was his college friend's sister, a woman who had needed a job fifty years ago when he was not yet August Mabee. It was she who found the editors, who made the deals. It was she who consoled him after his first wife had died, she who knew all three wives who had followed, and most of the girlfriends along the way. The marketer was a healthy, tanned man in his forties who dressed like he was twenty-five, who spoke the language of jargon and whose smile never seemed real.

August Mabee coughed again and took a sip of water. His throat always hurt nowadays. It was raw all the time due to a lack of saliva. Swallowing was like passing sandpaper down his esophagus. The water helped with that, but he could not drink too much, or he would have to piss, and he was not about to excuse himself for a potty break.

The applause died down, and he managed a smile at the crowd. He began to speak, in a voice like rocks and coffee. He made a joke, not a good one in his mind, but he was the famous August Mabee, and if he made a joke, his public would laugh and nod and remark how witty and wise he still was. And they did. He thanked them for coming, and he meant it, because without them, he would not be the famous August Mabee. He cleared his throat and opened the new collection to the spot marked by a yellow Post-It note.

He looked at the page, at the title of the story: "Mountain Nasty Tall". Shaking his head, he scanned his audience again and said, "You know, it gets boring."

The marketer shifted in his seat and glanced toward the editor. The editor's eyes had gone wide, and August could see from the podium that the two of them were nervous the old man was

going to sabotage the lucrative comeback they had hoped for. *Why wasn't he just reading the fucking story printed on the fucking page?* Only the agent remained calm. August smiled at her, and he continued to speak. The podium and the stage were gone now, replaced by a low-lit bar and the smell of beer and peanuts, a little vodka melting away ice cubes in a glass.

“See, you climb six, seven, hours each day, and it's steep and hard, and you soon lose interest in conversation. Your guide doesn't speak much English, and you don't really feel like making the effort to be understood. Your mouth is occupied by breathing – by the third day you're already huffing and puffing too much to breathe through your nose – so you can't talk much anyway. So, you find yourself drawn more and more inwards.”

August heard whispers in the crowd. Yes, they were familiar with his history. He continued.

“You talk to yourself. You make mental notes of all the wonderfully different and unique observations about mountain climbing that you will make once you're back down. You want to write a treatise on how life is like climbing a mountain, how you can only get to the top one step at a time, that the best part of the trip is the journey itself and not the destination, but then you realize all these things have been said before.

“You keep climbing, up, up, up,” he said, raising his hand a little higher off the podium with each “up”. He liked it when some in the audience chuckled.

“And sometimes it's down, down, down. You didn't realize before you started that climbing a mountain is rarely just about ‘up’. There are peaks and valleys – like life, eh? – and though on the whole you are rising toward that final high point in the sky, you have to expect some down times before you reach the pinnacle. And soon you get tired of all your lame mountain philosophizing, and you turn to religion to help get you a little further up the hill.”

More chuckles from the crowd. August saw the marketer ease back in his chair.

“You pray for your family. You name each one of those people you love most, and you ask God for special things for them. Not meaningless things like job promotions or better husbands. But the real important things in life, like belief in one’s own self-worth, like the will to overcome medical problems, like the ability to love completely but know when to let the other live her life. You pray for your wife, that she gets up the mountain, but more importantly, that she knows when to say enough is enough, to call it quits if necessary. You pray for yourself. And it actually feels good. Forgetting the pain of the ascent, losing yourself in thoughts for others, you find that another half-hour has slipped by, and you’re that much closer to your destination.

“But you still have a lot of time to kill. So, you turn to lists. You name all the presidents. James Garfield, Chester Arthur... that makes thirty-three... and Franklin Pierce.

“Even if you have no idea of anything Franklin Pierce might have done while president, you’re glad that you finally remembered his name, at least. And you vow that if you make it to the top of the mountain, you’ll buy a biography of Franklin Pierce. Hell, you’ll write one.

“You run through the last thirty-four World Series winners, going back to the year of your birth, and each time you get to a year where your Cardinals won, you scream their name in your head and cheer a bit. You name heavyweight champs and movies starring Clark Gable, and all fifty states.

“And you wonder, how could you forget Indiana?

“And yes, you’re bored, but you’re grateful at the same time to have these moments to yourself, when you can think about those you love, about old friends, and about Franklin Pierce.

“And days four and five pass on the mountain, and you feel the cold biting you every time you stop to take a sip of water, and your legs need a little more time each morning to get

going, and you're a little more sick of the steady diet of porridge for breakfast and soup and vegetables for dinner.

"Kilimanjaro still stands hard and cold, high above. You think to yourself, do I stand a chance? You try to sleep with the vision of that mountain in your head. You try to quiet your brain, to stop the counting, to stop the lists.

"And you pray."

August paused. He closed his eyes, pinching them tightly shut, trying to close off his ears to the shuffling in the auditorium. He stayed like that until he figured the marketer would be getting antsy again. August pictured the editor passing a ring-covered hand through her hair, likely preparing to take the stage herself and end this old man's last delusional attempt at lecture. He knew the agent would stop her before she got the chance to make a fool of herself. August remained steady at the podium, eyes shut. Some might have thought he'd retreated so far inside himself that he'd found his God in there and was in the middle of some great dialogue with his creator. The author would have found such an idea ridiculous. Finally, he opened his eyes and again looked at the page marked with the Post-it note.

"At 11:30 on the fifth night, Sam heard Gabriel calling," he began, reading the first line of the story.

"'Time to go, bwana! We gotta get climbing,' he said from outside the tent.

"'Déjà?' Isabelle moaned, pushing against Sam's body to create a little heat through their sleeping cocoons. A ferocious wind tore at the thin, green canvas of the tent, screaming at them to stay inside.

"'Allez, it's time, Belle.'

“Another moan. They shimmied, still half-asleep, into long underwear, wool fleeces and rain gear. They put on extra sock layers and laced up bulky boots. They pulled on balaclavas and strapped heavy headlamps to their foreheads.

“Sam unzipped the tent and seven minutes before midnight, he and Isabelle stepped out into the cold.

“Gabriel took the lead, heading up the rock. Isabelle followed, and Sam stuck closely to her back. Massawe appeared behind out of nowhere, a black ghost against the white snow. The wind died away, and suddenly all was quiet as they struck out for the peak, 5,000 feet above. A few hundred yards from the campsite, Sam looked over his shoulder to see a short string of glittering lights, the headlamps of other climbers, stretching from behind, back to camp. What odd midnight vigil was this? Who were these pilgrims, and why were they performing this penance? Sam turned back, facing upward again, and planted a heavy foot a little further up the rock.

“The headache Isabelle had had for the last two days got worse fast, and she started feeling nauseated. After a couple hours, their pace slowed from what was already hardly more than a crawl, and a couple other groups passed them. Isabelle kept sitting down on rocks.

“‘Don’t do that, bwana,’ Gabriel said to Sam while pointing toward Isabelle, slumped over on a rock. ‘She go to sleep now, we gotta go down.’

“‘Non! I’m all right,’ she said, almost out of breath. ‘Just help me to stand.’

“‘That’s the spirit, girl,’ Sam said, pulling her to her feet. Massawe grumbled something in Swahili toward Gabriel, but he just shrugged in response.

“They kept going. The shadows and the moonlight played with Sam’s mind, and he thought he saw wolves slinking about in the wispy snow. They were thin and hungry-looking,

long tongues dangling out of icicle-sharp teeth. They darted in and out in the slithery snow, hiding behind rocks. Sam wanted to warn the others about the wolves, but he was too tired.

“They trudged on, stopping with increasing frequency so Isabelle could rest and drink some water. Looking up became discouraging. It was so steep, and it never seemed to end, just a sheer face of snow and rock, jutting up toward the sky. After over four hours of climbing, Sam realized his energy was just about out. Isabelle could no longer speak. She sat down on a rock while Gabriel poured some sugary tea.

“‘How high are we right now?’ Sam asked, noticing how out of breath it made him just uttering a few words.

“‘Around 17,700 feet, a little over 2,000 feet from the top,’ Gabriel responded, as if he contained within him some sort of innate altimeter. He pulled out a cigarette and lit up, passing one to Massawe.

“‘How can you smoke up here?’

“A careless shrug was his only reply.

“Sam took two tin cups full of tea from Gabriel and plodded over to his wife, holding out one of the cups. When she did not respond right away, Sam worried she had lost consciousness.

‘You still with us?’

“She glanced up and nodded. He had to place the cup in her hands himself.

“‘Maybe we should go back. You’re not looking good, Belle.’

“‘No. I’m fine,’ she said, sipping the tea. ‘We keep going.’

“Sam knew they should have turned back right at that moment. He could see that Isabelle was done, and he wanted so much for her to tell him it was over. But he didn’t have the heart to deny her. It had to be her choice. He knew her. She would never let him forget it if they failed to

summit. This is what he told himself. She pushed herself up with the help of her ski poles, and they continued onward.

“The tea gave them a boost that lasted only a few minutes, and finally she said, ‘*Je n’en peux plus.*’ I can’t do any more.

“Sam thought of continuing on without her, of letting Massawe carry her down to safety, like some bone-and-sinew guardian angel. She could rest at the camp; she could eat. And Sam could go on with Gabriel. But he didn’t want to go on without her. It didn’t make sense. They were a team, so he asked her to give a little more.

“They kept climbing.

“‘Do you see that rock?’ Gabriel asked. ‘From there it’s only another hour to Stella Point.’

“‘Another hour? From there?’ Sam gasped. ‘How long to Uhuru Peak from Stella?’

“‘You want to turn around?’

“‘No. It’s just... I’m worried about my wife. I’m not sure if it’s wise —’

“‘Oh no, don’t blame me for this, Sam,’ she said, pressing her elbows into a nearby rock. ‘We keep going.’

“As if on cue, a glow appeared over the eastern horizon, and Sam thought that the sun might just serve to rejuvenate them, so they kept going.

“Keep going. That’s what it all comes down to, Sam thought. They had to *keep going*, and they had to do it together.”

August glanced up from the podium and took a moment to scan the audience. They seemed to be paying attention. It appeared to him that they were into the story. Most of them probably thought they knew how the story would end. More importantly, August remembered

how this particular story had ended. He took a long sip of water, finishing what was left in the glass. “Throat’s dry, sorry,” he told the audience, eliciting laughter. He poured out the rest of the bottle, took one more sip, and looked down again at what was written.

“They made it to Gabriel’s rock. They made it to Stella Point, minutes before the sun broke over the horizon. It was like going from hell to heaven. No more were they hiking up dark rock. They found themselves in a snowy paradise, Kilimanjaro’s rimmed crater an immense bowl of inviting snow, its two massive glaciers glinting pink and baby blue in the sun’s warming rays. Bending around to the left, Sam saw the path that led upwards to Uhuru Peak, and they set out for the roof of Africa. It was still an hour’s climb away, but now the goal stood right there in front of them.

“Keep going.

“Only a few paces away from the peak, Sam choked up as he started whispering an old song in Isabelle’s ear. He had planned it for days, but now that he was there on top of Africa with his wife, he could barely get the words out. He stuttered through the corny lines of the chorus:

‘I don’t remember much, just that big ol’ wall,
But you and me, baby, we held t’gether through the squall,
T’gether, we got up that mountain, that mountain nasty tall.’

“Isabelle pulled down her balaclava, the sun’s rays glinting off her blonde hair. She smiled at her husband, and he took her hand. They walked the last few steps, until they could go no higher.

“Keep going.”

August looked up from the page and waited. This was the part he always hated. This pause. This moment when the crowd tried to digest what he’d said, to decide whether it was any good and worthy of their praise. He knew this particular story was not his best. Hell, maybe it

wasn't even very good. But it was a story he'd wanted to tell all his life. Damn the critics, damn the fans, if they didn't like it.

The crowd sat still for a moment before the first hands began to clap. He surveyed the crowd and whispered a thank you, inaudible among the applause. When it subsided, he asked if there were any questions, and for twenty minutes he answered questions he had heard hundreds of times before. People always wanted answers: why did that happen? And what did that mean? They wanted insight and closure and security. They wanted answers that only they could truly provide for themselves. Soon it was time for the last question, asked by a smart-looking teenager at the back of the room.

“So many of your stories end in death. You've killed some of your best characters – Marcus Woo, Ivan the butcher, Juniper Grady... Why in this story did you decide to let Isabelle live?”

August looked at the boy and tried to remember what it was like when he was that age, before mountains and wives and elegies. And he answered the last question.

“Because I needed her to live.”

With that, August took one last sip of water from his glass. He coughed. He waved to the crowd. He nodded to his agent. And August Mabey walked off the stage for the last time.

Ronny

Ronny's probably dead by now.

The first time I met him, I could see why his mom's ad had asked for a male nurse, someone who could handle his size. He was sitting in his motorized wheelchair. In his tiny bedroom, he seemed enormous. Not fat, just really, really tall. I couldn't tell from him sitting in the chair, but later, when I knew him better, I asked him. Six foot eight. I was a good six inches shorter, but I was physically capable of taking on the job.

I was there every weekday, twelve hours a day. I'd show up at 8, before his mom headed off to work, going straight to his room to check on him. He usually slept until noon, but he needed someone there for him just in case something went wrong.

When you can't walk, can't use your arms normally, can't eat without help, can't shit without help, well, there aren't many reasons to get up in the morning. So I let him sleep. I didn't mind. The guy had the biggest movie collection I'd ever seen. His personal screening room—a dingy office with a 26-inch flat screen TV set up on a desk—was a couple doors down the hall from his bedroom. After checking on him, I'd take out the PB&J sandwiches I always packed for breakfast and choose a DVD. Pretty mindless job, really. After my morning cinema, I'd check on Ronny again, usually finding him still out cold. If he hadn't stirred by noon, I always woke him up.

I'd feed him his breakfast, then get him cleaned up. Clean around the catheter—that is to say, his penis. That was strange. I mean, I'd never touched another guy's dick before. He wasn't circumcised.

He was cool about everything, though. After all, he'd been having someone do this stuff for him for a few years by that point. He never acted embarrassed, never seemed to be really affected by it. It was normal to him.

It wasn't really normal to me, though. After all, I'd never been a nurse before. Until I got the job, I didn't know the first thing about taking care of someone like Ronny. I had never even seen a catheter. But I needed a job, and I didn't want to work very hard. I figured taking care of a guy who was almost paralyzed wouldn't be too demanding. I mean, besides the cleaning and the feeding, what else was there to do? And it paid a lot better than babysitting. So after I read his mom's ad, I wrote up a résumé, gave myself a bunch of qualifications and experience, made myself sound really professional, and I prayed she wouldn't check my references or ask for any sort of certification.

I researched how to insert and remove a catheter, checked out information on all his meds, what not to mix with what. Even taught myself CPR and how to give the Heimlich. By the time I went to work for them a week after my interview, I felt like an expert.

Of course, knowing and doing are two different things. The first time I had to remove his catheter, it was disgusting. After draining out the piss with a syringe, I took hold of Ronny's penis and slowly, carefully coaxed out the tube. Poor Ronny might not have been able to control his body much anymore, but he could still feel, and when I pulled out his catheter, he screamed into his pillow, thrashing to his left and right, which only made my job more difficult and his pain that much greater. Also, the urine left inside shot all over the place. His face had turned bright red with pain by the time I had finally gotten the thing out. One thing you learn pretty quickly is how long catheters are.

After that little bonding experience, I decided to take him for a spin around the neighborhood. He didn't want to go. If it was up to him, I think he would have just stayed in the TV room all day watching whatever new DVDs his mom had picked up for him at the video shop she managed. But I couldn't imagine remaining indoors for so long.

"Come on," I said. "Nice day out."

"Wudja 'spec', Dev'? S'Los Anj'les. Wuther's always good."

"All the same, we're going for a walk," I said, making sure his head was strapped firmly to his wheelchair neck support.

He and his mom lived in the shitty part of West Hollywood, east of Fairfax, just a couple blocks from that eyesore of a gay porn theatre on Santa Monica. We walked by it, though, because I guessed correctly that he'd get a kick out of the clever names of the porn flicks: *Butt Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Sideways ... and Upside Down*, and his personal favorite, *XXXMen 3: The Last Cram*. Pretty juvenile stuff, but when you're slowly dying, I say you can laugh at whatever you want.

A discussion on best porn titles led him to tell me about his own sexual history. I never figured out if he was making the shit up or not, but he said how before his body went totally south, he used to get laid a lot. He said the wheelchair only helped him.

"Lozza chicks wan' know whuz like t'do't with a guy inna chur," he said.

I noticed how others on the sidewalk stared at this behemoth in a wheelchair, but Ronny didn't seemed bothered by it.

Even after he lost the ability to walk on his own, he said, up until he was 20 he was "fully funkshnl, sex-wise."

"You miss that?" I asked.

“‘Snot t’bad yet.”

I wondered how bad it would have to get before it was ‘too bad’? He had gotten used to his condition, he said, but he told me how at first it was hard to take. He was 18 when his doctor told him that most likely the disease would kill him by 35. Ronny told me this with that same silly smile on his face, like it was no big deal being given a death sentence. The worst, he said, wasn’t the dying; what sucked was losing control of your body piece by piece. Every day, he lost a little more motor function. Every month there was one less thing he could do on his own. Tie your shoes—gone. Control your bladder—gone. Type on a computer—gone. Pretty soon he knew he’d be just a lump of meat, unable to digest food, unable to speak, his brain a prisoner of his useless body.

Ronny had come to accept his inevitable death and just wanted “tbe done withit a’ready”. I would say he had made his peace with God about it, but that wouldn’t be exactly right. “Omni tsher Gawd igzistss,” he’d say, his head straining to bust out from where it was held in place by the wheelchair’s neck supports. “Buddiff he does, man, Ommuna kill’um.”

*

Ronny’s mom—she told me to call her Patti—usually came home around six or seven, headed straight upstairs to where she kept the gin, and when she came down an hour or so later, she was always well lubricated.

Ronny and I were watching *Saw 3* one night when she came and stood in the doorway. One arm over her head, she leaned against the frame, the other arm on her hip. She seemed to like the movie better from there. She waited for a particularly bloody scene before slurring, “I don’t know how you can watch this junk, Ronny. It’ll rot your brain to hell, you know!”

“Shup, mawm, ‘zbest prts cummup!”

She looked at me. “What did he say?”

“Shut up, Mom. The best part’s coming up,” I repeated.

She just laughed, and a moment later I heard her mounting the stairs, probably to get another drink in her. When the movie ended, I got my stuff together and headed out for the night. She came back down and walked me to the door.

“I don’t mind, really. He can watch movies ’til he starts shitting ticket stubs for all I care. I mean, he’s going to be dead soon anyway. And it’s not like he can do anything else. I tell you, what kind of life is that? What kind of fucking life is that, anyway?”

I didn’t have an answer. If she was looking for some speech about the beauty of all life or something, she wouldn’t get it from me. I shrugged, said good night, told her I’d see her in the morning.

The next night, the same scene repeated itself. She drunkenly spat out how awful it was to be Ronny. I told her he didn’t seem to mind so much.

“What are you talking about, David? He wants to die as much as I do!”

I smiled. “Wait, you mean you want to die, or you want *him* to?”

She laughed. “Either, really.”

Something in our relationship changed at that moment. Admitting to another person that you’re contemplating your own death, that you’re actually maybe wishing it... well, you don’t usually say such things to the supermarket checkout clerk.

“Wait a second,” she said, dashing back into the house, returning a moment later with a bottle of cheap red. No glasses. We sat down on the front steps, passing that bottle back and forth until it was empty.

I guess it was inevitable that we'd sleep together that night. I think she needed it. Her job was just something she did nine hours a day so she had health coverage for Ronny, and since her husband split when Ronny was ten, I figured she didn't have a lot of men banging down her door. One look at Ronny, and they probably went running. So, I felt fine giving her what she needed. She wasn't bad to look at, a little bloated by the alcohol, and a lot older than me, but I'd had worse.

I ended up spending a lot of nights with Patti. We kept the relationship hidden from Ronny. I thought it might weird him out, his mom fucking his nurse and all. No need to complicate matters. So, whenever we were in his company, we played it straight. On the nights I stayed over, I just hung around the house until he was asleep, and once he was out, well, like I said, he was dead to the world. And how hard could it be, after all, to hide our little affair from the guy who couldn't leave his bed without help?

I'd been there about six months, fucking his mom for four, when one day I was in the middle of putting Ronny's catheter back in. I was holding his penis, the foreskin peeled back, threading the lubricated tube into his urethra, when he asked through the pain, "'Zmuh mum any good 't fuggn?" I'd gotten really good at understanding his speech, even though it had gotten progressively worse since I'd started caring for him. I knew well enough not to flinch at the statement, as I didn't want to hurt him, and I didn't want to give anything away.

"How's that?"

"Y'hrrd me. I know y'all're fuggn. 'Mnot deaf yet, y'know. Y'can stop blassin' a TV inna mornin' too."

I stifled a laugh, keeping my eyes on the hole in the tip of his penis, waiting until I felt the tube hit the back of his sphincter. “Yeah, guess it’s been going on a while now. You okay with it?”

“Don’ care ’bawt n’thin’. D’whatcha wan’.”

The catheter hit his sphincter, and I inflated the balloon. Then I attached the drainage bag. “She seems lonely, that’s all. Depressed.”

Ronny breathed deeply, trying to minimize the pain. I finished up with the catheter, making sure I’d done everything correctly. I’d done it so many times already, that I felt I could probably do it with my eyes closed by that point.

“Yuh. But y’know, yern’ th’firs’.”

The possibility had occurred to me. Often drunk. Clinically depressed. In need of a man to make her feel needed a few times a week. Made sense that she’d had similar relationships with other former employees.

“Duzza same thin’ withalla yuh.”

“Is that why the others left?” I asked, pulling Ronny’s sweatpants back up.

“Dunno. She duzn’ tell me shid.”

I washed up and made his lunch.

*

A few weeks later, I walked into Ronny’s room and found him shaking really bad. Fuck, I had no idea what to do.

I called 911, and they were quick to respond. They rushed him to the hospital. Turns out he’d gotten a bad kidney infection, which caused him to develop a high fever and the shakes.

The doctors got everything under control, but Ronny had to stay a few days for observation. I felt like a fucking idiot.

A nurse at the hospital asked me for my name and had me complete a form, since Patti hadn't arrived yet. I filled everything out, and she told me she just needed proof of my nursing certification. I told her I didn't have it on me, and she scolded me for working with a patient without having the proper documentation present. She was cute, and I tried flirting with her a bit, asking her to let me slide. She smiled back at me and said it was fine, that I could fax over a copy. She gave me the fax number, and I contemplated forging the document. Couldn't be that hard, but I didn't want to risk getting into legal trouble. I realized my gig was done.

That night I told Patti she'd better find someone else, that I wasn't a real nurse. She sat up in bed and arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

I thought about reaching for the night table and grabbing a cigarette. Instead I just got out of bed and picked my pants up off the floor. "No training at all. I just read a bunch of stuff on the internet. I actually thought it wouldn't be that hard, you know?"

She laughed. It sounded more like a roar. I'd heard her laugh before, but this time was different. Her laugh was usually subdued, cautious. But this was one of those "tears rolling down your cheeks" laughs that could just as easily turn into crying. I picked up my shirt and pulled it over my chest while she kept laughing.

"You're not a nurse?" she managed to squeak out between convulsions.

"That's right," I said, eyeing the cigarettes again.

"You must be a fucking genius to have lasted this long!"

I smiled. "Nah. Guess I just know what people need."

"Too bad," she said. "You're the best nurse Ronny's ever had."

The next day I visited Ronny at the hospital, and I told him I'd be leaving.

"T'bad," he said. "Yer probla th'bes' lay muh mawm zever had."

I chuckled at that. "How would you know?"

"Y'lassd lah longr tha' mos'."

I walked out of his hospital room, and I haven't seen either Ronny or his mom since.

Patti's probably got a new lover. But I hope it's not another nurse.

Truth is, I just hope Ronny's dead.

Life underground had been wonderful at first. Antoine didn't have to go to school anymore, and he could stay all day in the happy darkness of the movie house just above their basement refuge. Silent films were standard fare, what with so many of the more recent films censored by the occupiers. Antoine loved the comedies best, especially anything with Charlot.

But it had been a year since he had been forced into hiding. Antoine longed for afternoons playing in the Luxembourg or just making the rounds on market day in rue Daguerre. Mostly, though, he was restless to join the others – the men, and a few women, too – who lived down the secret corridor, the ones who fought back.

There was nothing else for him, anyway. His father was long gone, taken by the wolves the night when he and his mother had first come to live in the cinema basement, and she was acting more and more strangely every day, talking about escaping Paris and joining his father, wherever he was. Antoine knew his father wasn't coming back, and no matter what he said to his mother, she wouldn't listen.

He was watching *The Kid* when he first learned of her disappearance. The mustachioed tramp flickered across the movie screen in black and white, chasing after his adopted son, when Belfort slid into the seat next to Antoine and tapped him on the shoulder, motioning to follow him. Antoine trailed him back into the projection room, and from there down the secret ladder into the basement.

"When is the last time you saw your *maman*?" Belfort asked.

Antoine shrugged, taking some tobacco and a bit of paper out of his pocket. "I don't know. Last night."

Belfort had a week's growth of beard, and his eyes said it had been nearly that long since he had last slept. "Where'd you get that?"

"Traded it with Jean-Michel. Why, you want some?"

"No. I don't smoke. You shouldn't either."

"Yeah, I know," Antoine mumbled. "I'm too young."

"Listen, stay down here the rest of the day. You hear?"

"But –"

Belfort gritted his teeth. "You stay down here. I'm serious!"

"All right," Antoine said, wondering if his mother had finally left the basement.

Why did she have to act so crazy? Antoine had gotten so tired of hearing her rants. He preferred hanging around Belfort and the others who were actually doing something other than hiding. Before the Occupation, Belfort had sold cheese in one of the *fromageries* on rue Daguerre. Back then, Belfort was not his name. Belfort was the pseudonym he had adopted when he joined the Resistance. He had explained to Antoine that the name was derived from the Lion of Belfort, the great bronze statue that stood high on its pedestal in the middle of Place Denfert, in recognition of the city's determination and will during the Prussian siege of 1870.

Everyone had taken pseudonyms, a way to hide their real identities from the occupiers. Antoine wanted a pseudonym, too. He wanted to become someone else, to fight against the wolves, to reclaim his city. He already had his name picked out. He would become Aster, the flower that took its name from the stars. He would wear a purple aster in the lapel of a neat black suit, and he would fight the wolves to the death. He would be as great as Colonel Rol himself,

the leader of the underground. He had never seen Rol, but he knew Rol was less than a hundred meters away, down the tunnel that led from the cinema basement to the Resistance headquarters in the catacombs.

There Antoine imagined Rol giving orders to Belfort and the others, some of them boys just a few years older than Antoine himself. With no radio communication equipment, Rol depended on the younger ones to work as runners, relaying messages from cell to cell.

“Belfort?” Antoine asked, before turning toward the ladder.

“What is it?”

“You know I’m ready, right?”

Belfort looked away, cupping his hand behind his neck. “Leave it, Antoine.”

“I could help. I can be a runner.”

Belfort forced a smile. “Thanks, kid. And I think you would be a good one. But you’re only twelve. Lucky for you, the war’s almost over.”

Antoine felt a lot older than twelve, though. Especially in the days after his mother’s disappearance. He heard the whispers of other refugees in the basement. – *Why would anyone – much less a Jewish woman – go outside at night, with the patrols increased the way they are? - I heard she was looking for her husband... - I heard she’d finally gone mad...*

Sitting in the darkened theater one afternoon, Antoine made a decision. He had already lost everything important to him. He could not stay hiding in the basement anymore. If Belfort and the others thought he was too young to help their cause, he would prove them wrong. He would become Aster, and he would fight.

The entire basement was a mess of bed linens draped over wires strung from wall to wall, an attempt to give each refugee family some semblance of privacy and personal space. Antoine

slipped through the sheeted corridor toward the stone wall with the thick wooden door that opened into the tunnel. Antoine used all his might to force the heavy door open, just enough to slither his body through.

He pushed the door closed behind him and was immediately enveloped by cold. Though an oppressive August sun beat down on the outside world, in the tunnel, Antoine's skin was all goose bumps. He hugged himself tightly, rubbing his bare arms and legs. He looked down the narrow corridor but could not see the end. Candles were punched into the walls every dozen paces or so, but each candle's light was not enough to cover stretches of darkness. Antoine moved slowly at first, wondering if he should just turn back to the relative safety of the refugee families.

No, he thought. I am not Antoine anymore. I am Aster. And he marched forward. In and out of weak candlelight, he moved faster and faster until each candle's glow seemed to flicker past him like the projector light from the old movies he had been watching for months. He clicked on, shivering, until he could finally see another door at the far end of the subterranean passageway. At the door, another sturdy wooden portal glowing silver in the candlelight, he pulled the rusted iron latch until it gave way. As he had done at the other end, he opened the door just enough to slide through to the other side.

He rubbed his eyes as they adjusted to the strong lamplight of the catacombs, though once he had regained his sight, he wished he had not. He was surrounded by bones. Hundreds of skulls stared hollow-eyed at the boy, the remnants of long-dead residents of Paris dumped and stacked here in the catacombs from church graveyards over a hundred years ago.

Antoine wanted to scream. He wished for a moment that his mother were there, that his life had never been invaded by wolves and skeletons and fear. But he pushed those thoughts

aside. He spat on the ground, figuring that's probably what Belfort or Rol would do if they ever got scared, and he moved ahead.

Another corridor wound around to his left, and he heard murmurings in that direction. He pressed on between the bone piles, the sound of conversation growing more audible until he stood outside what appeared to be another burial chamber, used as a sort of makeshift conference room. He saw a group of men and women, some sitting on the earthen floor, others standing with their arms crossed, a couple of them leaning their shoulders into the skeleton walls. All of them were focused on one man, lean but strong in appearance, with an aquiline nose perched below sleep-heavy eyes. Everyone looked riveted to those piercing eyes, to the commanding voice. Antoine knew he was looking at Colonel Rol, the leader of the Resistance.

"Belfort," the man barked.

"Yes, Colonel!" Antoine's friend responded, straightening himself up.

"You're going out tonight. Marco Polo Garden. A runner will be there to meet you."

Belfort accepted his mission with a smart salute, and the Colonel nodded. Antoine thought he almost detected a smile flash across the leader's face. The meeting began to break up, and Antoine stood by as the young men and women filed past him, heading in different directions to their sleeping quarters in the labyrinthine catacombs. The boy dawdled in the shadows, not sure of what he should do. Belfort frowned upon making eye contact with him.

"Antoine, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not Antoine anymore. I want to be called 'Aster'."

Belfort took him by the shoulder and pointed him toward the tunnel. "What's an aster?"

"It's a... kind of flower."

They arrived at the tunnel door, and Belfort flung it open, as if it was made of cardboard.

“You can’t be serious,” he said, ushering Antoine into the tunnel. “You want to name yourself after a flower?”

“It’s a flower, but it’s the Greek word for ‘star’. You see? It seems innocent and pretty, but it has the power of a star. And... it was my mother’s favorite flower.”

They walked in silence for several paces, Belfort’s strong hand still resting on Antoine’s back. Antoine thought he could feel Belfort shivering against the cold.

“All right, if that’s what you want to be called. But I’m sorry, Antoine...”

“Aster.”

“Aster. Sorry. But you can’t just come walking over to the catacombs. You need to stay with the other refugees in the basement. You’re safe there.”

Antoine wrenched free from Belfort’s grasp. He turned around and faced the much larger man. “Safe? What do I care if I’m safe? Both my parents are gone. I’ll never be safe! I’m tired of hiding, doing nothing. You say the war will end. Good! I’m glad. But then what will I do? Belfort, please. Talk to Rol...”

“No! You’re too young. I’m sorry. It’s for your own good, Antoine.”

Antoine turned back and began again to walk down the corridor toward the basement.

“It’s Aster,” he mumbled. “My name is Aster.”

*

If Belfort didn’t want Antoine’s help, he would show him how valuable he could be. He waited until everyone was asleep before he tiptoed out of his sleeping area. Antoine crept up the ladder and unlatched the trap. He pushed his way into the projection booth, cluttered with movie reels and thick with the scent of the cheap cologne that Yves the projector man wore. He looked

through the small window and saw the silent, empty movie hall. No Charlot dancing across the screen, no detectives fighting bad guys. No people in the seats. How many bodies had sat in those red velvet-covered spaces, lost in make-believe worlds for an hour or two? Where were all those people now? Antoine scanned the theater once more and stepped out of the projection booth.

He shuffled through the small lobby to the front door and peered out a window. He could see no wolves, but he knew they were out there waiting. Antoine, he thought to himself. You stay here. Aster, you're the one who has to step outside. He took a deep breath in and pushed the door open, planting his feet on the sidewalk.

All was quiet. Well after curfew, the streets were deserted. Rol had told Belfort to meet a runner at the fountain in the Marco Polo Garden, a fifteen-minute walk away. Aster will be there too, he thought. Antoine took one last look all around and dashed across the street to the small park on the other side. Keeping to the shadows, he skipped onwards to the far side of the park. If he was to make it to the fountain, he would have to use as much natural cover as he could, and the park, with its trees and bushes, would get him a few meters closer to the fountain without being seen.

In a moment he felt as though he could fly, giddy with the thought of making a difference in the Resistance effort. He was still afraid, but he felt ready. No sooner had he arrived at the other side of the park, though, when he spied something moving in the shadows, coming up Avenue Denfert, from the direction of the fountain. Belfort. Antoine was too late. Belfort had already met his contact, and he was nearly back. Antoine frowned. Here he was, crouching in a bush, not even fifty meters from the movie theater. His hero Belfort was about to complete his

mission, no thanks to the mighty Aster. Antoine decided to stay hidden until Belfort had passed. No sense in making Belfort any angrier with him than he already was.

Belfort paused at the corner of Denfert and Raspail. Antoine knew that the safest bet would be for Belfort to skirt the large roundabout that was Place Denfert, and reenter the catacombs through the movie theater. Antoine was surprised when instead Belfort chose to run straight across the open street toward the catacombs' entrance. Suddenly, Antoine saw why. A few dozen paces behind Belfort, another figure chased after him.

Wolf, the boy thought to himself. He's going to catch Belfort. The soldier's cry of "*Halt!*" echoed off the cobblestones, but Belfort kept running. When the soldier shot a round into the sky as warning, Belfort came to a stop, just as he arrived at the middle of Place Denfert, where the great bronze lion stood guard. Safe in his hiding place, Antoine wished he could stop this movie now unrolling before his eyes. Belfort turned and backed up against the pedestal of the statue, the lion's back a few meters above him. The soldier approached, his machine gun pointed at Belfort. Belfort stood as still as the statue overhead.

Antoine could not hear what the soldier was saying, but he could see Belfort turn around, planting his hands against the stone base of the monument. In a moment Belfort would be handcuffed, searched, and the valuable information with which he had been entrusted would be lost to the occupiers. Worse, Belfort would surely be executed. Antoine flashed from his hiding place, stealing out of the wolf's view to the lion's-head side of the monument. He dug his hands into tiny cracks in the stone, scaling the front side. Not knowing exactly what he was doing, preferring not to think too much, he continued to climb onto the lion, hoisting himself up the lion's mane, swinging onto its back. In a matter of seconds, he was crouching on the bronze statue, looking down at the soldier, who was still barking commands at Belfort.

Antoine's heart raced, and he shook from the adrenaline pumping through his body. He gulped once and leapt from the lion's back, the full force of his body aimed squarely at the head of the soldier several meters below. His feet slammed into the guard, and both crashed to the ground. Antoine was the worse for it, his right ankle buckling upon contact. He saw Belfort turn around, a look of disbelief on his face.

But Belfort was a fighter, and fast, and before the soldier could regain his footing, Belfort plowed into him, his right fist bashing the man's face. The soldier dropped his gun, and Belfort picked it up, aiming it at his would-be captor. Without taking an eye off of the wolf turned prey, Belfort rasped, "Are you all right, An... Aster?"

Antoine fought back tears, trying to stand despite the pain in his ankle. He forced a smile and said, "Yes, thank you. I'm –"

A shot rang out, and Antoine crumpled back to the ground. Pain seared through his chest. Belfort bent over the boy, as shouts came from several directions. The wolves were closing in, and in another minute, Aster's heroic act would be for naught.

He squinted up at Belfort as the man tried to gather him up in his arms. Belfort looked panicked, scared. He seemed suddenly younger, too. Antoine smiled at him through the pain. It hurt to breathe, and he could feel a warm wetness spreading across his back and chest. So, this is what it feels like to die, he thought.

Belfort was screaming at him, his eyes darting left and right at the approaching soldiers, but Antoine couldn't focus anymore on what he was saying.

There were other sounds too, the clamor of the approaching wolves. Belfort seemed to be hesitating. Finally, he slipped his arms from behind Antoine's back and set off to the hiding

place. As Belfort ran, Antoine thought about the wolves, who would have to satisfy themselves with one small kill.

Foul Ball

An usher wearing a black Orioles cap and green suspenders over her white blouse took the tickets and led D and Mace midway down the section, folding open their seats and dusting off some peanut shell remnants. Mace thanked her and gave her \$10.

“Ten bucks?” D asked once the woman was a few rows up. “We’re supposed to give ‘em ten dollars for two swipes of a towel across our seats?”

“Financial crisis is probably hittin’ her more than it is me,” Mace responded, taking a bite out of his barbecue sandwich.

D had been witness to his friend’s generosity for nearly 15 years, but still the annoyingly inherent goodness of the guy sometimes surprised him. Mace had a way of making D always feel inferior. In college, it had been by measure of batting average and home runs, of higher grades and hotter girlfriends. Even their nicknames denoted a pecking order. Though they were both named Jason, one had become Mace because of the way he had wielded his bat like a medieval weapon. The other had been tagged Derelict, later shortened to D, for his generally slovenly appearance.

Mace was now an orthopedic surgeon in an elite medical practice. He had the three beautiful kids. His wife Katie still looked great in a bikini. He had achieved a much-deserved higher status. Mace didn’t do any of it maliciously, though. He simply was better than D.

D was reminded how when Katrina hit a few years after college, Mace, then still an intern at Harbor Hospital, had flown down to the Gulf on his own dime just to try and help out. He had ended up spending six weeks volunteering in a half-destroyed clinic in Bay St. Louis,

Mississippi. Katie had found it totally normal that her husband would leave her and the kids for such a long time. “He’s needed there, Jason,” was all she said about it. When he finally came back, he returned to work, to his family, to his regular, day-to-day life. He barely even talked about what had gone on in Bay St. Louis. He had been a hero to countless people who had lost everything. Ten bucks offered to an usher who may or may not have been down on her luck certainly didn’t deserve much mention.

What had D done during those six weeks? He railed against the government and got outraged when he saw YouTube videos taken from inside the Super Dome. He had told Katie that he wished he could help in some way. He had sent \$50 to the Red Cross. That had been something, at least. D slouched back in his chair, stretching his legs over the empty seat in front of him, and scanned the field.

The Yankees were in town, an early summer day full of sunshine and blue sky. D loved Camden Yards, with its brick warehouse stretching beyond the outfield from right toward center. The bowl of forest green seats sat nearly empty, still an hour before game time. The hated Yankees were smugly taking batting practice in their familiar navy blue warm-up shirts and gray pants. Pitchers stood around in the outfield, arms crossed, their sharp, blue caps and wraparound sunglasses making them look like some sort of futuristic version of policemen. Children lined the areas closest to the field, stretching limbs and vocal chords in the hope that one of the Yankee stars – Jeter, A-Rod, Tex – would saunter over and scribble his name on their caps, programs, balls.

The cracks of the bat-on-ball contact in the cage echoed around the stadium, the loudest and most recognizable of a symphony of ballpark sounds. Balls thwopping into leather gloves provided lesser percussions while the trill of children mixed with the deep-throated jeers of men,

jumbo beers in hand, already on the Yankees' case. If one listened carefully, there were other sounds too: the clinking of glass bottles being put into plastic vendor trays, metal turnstiles clicking as fans entered the park, and over the loudspeaker, Jim Hunter and Jim Palmer – the silky voices of the Orioles pre-game show – bantering back and forth.

A-Rod was taking his turn in the cage, lining shots into the gaps, popping one over the fence in left. D shook his head.

“What?” Mace asked.

“Cheater.”

“Ah, let it go,” Mace said, stuffing another bite of barbecue into his mouth.

A-Rod stepped out of the batters' box and began chatting with another player while a third trotted in to take his cuts. From where Mace and D sat, they could hear the tall third baseman's laughter as he joked with his teammate.

“That guy used steroids for years, Mace, and the whole time, the fans treated him like he was the next Cal Ripken. How can you just say ‘let it go’? He shouldn't be allowed to set foot in a baseball stadium.”

“Won't be many guys left on the field if you eliminate all the cheats, D.”

“Doesn't make it right. Of all people, I think you should understand that.”

Mace swallowed down the last bite of his sandwich before responding. “Nobody's perfect, D.”

You are, D wanted to say. You'd never take steroids. You'd never cheat on a test, or on your wife, or with someone else's.

D remembered what had happened during the fall season of their senior year, when McGwire and Sosa were muscling their way into the record books, both on their way to breaking

Roger Maris' single season record of 61 home runs. A freshman outfielder had arrived at school, a fast kid who could hit. D didn't want to lose his starting position, and he thought about juicing. If he could just add a few extra pounds of muscle, maybe he'd be able to stay ahead of the new kid, just long enough to finish out his college career. He just felt he needed a little edge. It was easy to get stuff. He asked around at an off-campus gym and bought some HGH from a guy who carried it around in a Craftsman toolbox in the trunk of his car.

He spent over an hour sitting in the bathroom of the suite he shared with Mace, a syringe full of growth hormone placed on the sink. When he heard Mace enter the suite, he grabbed the syringe off the sink and plunged it into his butt. He was just pulling the needle out when Mace entered the bathroom.

"Oh, sorry, D –" he said. D faced his friend, attempting to hide the needle behind his back. He watched Mace as he glanced at the empty vial that had stood next to the syringe on the sink, recognizing it immediately.

"Anabolic or HGH?" he asked.

"HGH," D mumbled.

"Give it to me."

D handed him the syringe. He could feel his heart pounding through his chest, and he couldn't look his friend in the eye.

"First time?" Mace asked, picking up the vial. He examined the label.

D nodded his head.

"Stuff doesn't even work, you know. HGH just gets rid of fat. It won't increase your muscle mass any."

"Whatever, it was... It's just that I'm not naturally ripped like you are, you know?"

“Not worth it, dude,” Mace said. He broke the needle in two, and wrapped it and the vial in toilet paper. “I’m putting this in a public garbage can somewhere. Just in case.”

Mace had left, and the two had never discussed it again.

“It’s just not fair,” D said, watching A-Rod as he trotted out to third base for some fielding practice.

“So?” Mace replied, scanning the stands for a beer man. “Since when has anything in life ever been fair?”

D noticed a certain edge in his friend’s voice, one that he had not heard before. Mace had always been so... cool. Mace signaled a vendor carrying two stacks of Bud. The man hustled over. “Let me lighten your load by two, boss,” Mace said to the vendor, reaching for his wallet in his back pocket.

“I got it,” D said, shoving a twenty toward the beer man before he could even get the cap off the second bottle. The vendor made change, and though he didn’t particularly want to, D tipped him three dollars. He wondered how much the man would have garnered from Mace. After all, if the usher got ten for doing next to nothing, the beer man’s effort in removing the two bottles from his tray, popping off the caps, then handing them to Mace ought to have been worth at least... \$17.50.

Mace passed a bottle to D, tilting the tip of his toward D in the process, as if to say thanks. He took a long swig and squinted out toward the checker-mowed green field. The two sat in silence as batting practice finished and the lame pre-game festivities began. When the starting lineup was announced over the loudspeaker, D filled out a scorecard with a pencil, scratching the name of each player into little boxes, writing down their numbers and positions in the field. D loved keeping score at baseball games. Like this, everything was ordered and accounted for.

When the game started, he'd use the familiar set of numbers, letters and symbols he learned as a kid to record every action that took place during the game. By the end, he'd have a precise record of everything that happened, from the first at-bat down to the final out. It would be perfect.

It was so different from his actual life, which was messy, disheveled, out of order. Ever since Mace had gone down to play hero in Mississippi, D had been doing something he knew he should not be doing. Sometimes the guilt was unbearable, yet he tried to keep his game face on. Maybe that was why D hated A-Rod so much, because they were so alike. A-Rod played a game, day in, day out, for years, one he was knowingly cheating at. And he had gotten away with it for a long time. The difference between the two, though, was that everyone now knew that A-Rod was a cheat. He'd admitted it himself. There he was, though, still playing ball, laughing it up with his friends by the cage. If D ever got caught, he wouldn't be allowed to keep playing his game.

By the sixth inning, the Yankees had built up a 5-1 lead on the Orioles. The only good thing about the game was that A-Rod had yet to reach base. As he came up with two outs and none on in the top of the sixth, D joined in with the rest of the crowd as they chanted, "Cheat!"

Mace sat calmly, sipping a beer. His friend's silence irked him and without taking his eyes off the batters' box, he said, "I just don't see how you can let this guy cheat without saying anything, without getting angry!"

Mace put his bottle down on the cement floor between his legs. "Didn't say I wasn't angry, man. I love this game. But my yelling 'cheat' isn't going to change anything. In the end, I guess there are more important things in my life than baseball."

"Like what?" D asked. "Like Katie? Maybe your life isn't so perfect after all, Mace. Maybe you ought to be yelling 'cheat' along with the rest of us."

“What... what are you talking about?” Mace asked. Something in the way he hesitated tipped D off. Mace must have suspected it already. And now he knew.

“Nothing,” D mumbled. “Forget it.”

A-Rod let a ball pass by, not even bothering to watch it slap into the catcher’s mitt. The umpire made no signal, and a digital “1” lit up under the “B” of the balls and strikes indicator on the scoreboard in right-center. The batter’s seeming indifference, his utter cool, only enraged the crowd more. He tapped the bottoms of his spikes with his bat, two quick knocks for each shoe, then stepped back into the box.

He ran the count to 2-2 without so much as considering swinging at a pitch. It was as if nothing mattered, not this at-bat, nor the game, nor the yells and screams of the thousands of people watching him, waiting for him to do something, and hoping to see him fail. They no longer yelled “cheat” and instead were roaring support for the O’s pitcher, a nameless middle reliever whose role in this minor drama was secondary. He was only a conduit, a necessary vehicle that would allow the more important players in the game – those on the field and in the stands – to move life forward.

D wondered what would happen if the pitcher just refused to pitch. What would happen if the game simply stopped, and not because of rain, or because the manager decided to put in someone new, or because a drunk fan got loose on the field. Those, after all, were only delays. What if it just stopped? What if everyone involved recognized it for the sham that it was, and right there and then, with a 2-2 count to A-Rod in the top of the sixth inning on a Saturday afternoon in the city of Baltimore, the game just ended?

D looked around the stadium. There were splotches of empty seats in the upper reaches of the ballpark, but the lower seats were packed with black- and orange-clad O’s fans, young and

old, all united against this one cheater in the batters' box. The sound of rage filled his ears as all around him fans participated in some sort of distorted mass prayer, inviting an unholy god to strike down the cheater on the field, or at the very least, strike him out. D finally looked to the man sitting to his right. Mace was no longer watching the game. He was looking squarely at D.

The crowd's roar continued, then tailed off as the pitcher made his delivery. D and Mace did not see A-Rod swing, but they heard the smack of wood on horsehide and followed the other fans' sightlines, craning their necks up to the sky. The ball was a pea reaching its arc against the light blue background, and D realized it was headed toward them in foul territory. As it screamed downward, some scrambled away, shielding themselves from the incoming projectile. Others pushed toward the place of impact. D felt a familiar rush of adrenaline as he prepared to snatch the ball out of the air. It was coming right for him. He reached up, stretching toward the ball. He could see its red seams spinning madly as the ball neared the seats. Inches away now, he readied himself for the blow that would leave his palm smarting. But the pain would be worth it. The ball was his.

And then it wasn't. He heard the sound of the ball slapping skin before he realized that Mace's beefy arm and mitt-like hand had outstretched his own and garnered the little white trophy. D smiled, about to congratulate his friend, but Mace just brought the ball down, looked at it, then pressed it into D's hand.

"You keep it," he said. "You're right. I never did like a cheat."

What Happened After Dinner

8:46 am: Paul called 911. He was seven hours and 26 minutes late.

Exactly thirteen hours earlier, Juliet pushed a silver-tipped piece of metal through the tiny hole in her right ear lobe. She regarded herself in the mirror as she tilted her head slightly to the left, forcing the small, hooped earring into place. The bags under her eyes never seemed to go away, and she didn't see the point of trying to cover them up with makeup anymore. Paul wouldn't notice, one way or the other.

"Mommy, when can I get my ears pieced?"

"'Pierced,' honey. And not for a few more years," she answered. In the mirror she could see the tiny person standing behind her, dressed in a white nightgown with an imprint of a sad-faced vintage teddy bear across the front. "All ready for bed, Ellie?"

"I'm not tired," the girl whined.

Juliet fastened the back of her earring into place and let out a quiet sigh. Four years old, and already her daughter wanted to pierce her ears, to stay up late. Tomorrow, she'd be asking for the keys to the car. From down the hall, she heard Paul in the kids' bathroom singing the bathtub song to Grace, who had just turned two. It was a silly, four-line rhyme that he'd invented for Ellie, and there was a time when Juliet thought the song was cute. There was a time when she thought her husband was the perfect man, and she the luckiest woman in the world. She thought it so cliché now that she had become so disgusted by him. As he started a new chorus of the song, she wanted to scream at him to just shut up.

She opened the medicine cabinet and grabbed the orange-brown plastic bottle which held the diazepam and popped one into her mouth. She ran the faucet, cupping her hand underneath the rushing water, feeling it bubble and cool into a little pool in her palm before slurping a sip into her mouth and swallowing the pill.

“Can I have a candy, Mom?”

She had almost forgotten that Ellie was behind her. She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth, hoping that the pill’s effect would take place quickly. “It’s not candy, Ell. And you can’t eat after brushing your teeth. Now, get on to bed, okay?”

Ellie stomped out of the bathroom, and Juliet took one last look at herself in the mirror. “Lost cause,” she mumbled to the reflection. What she hated the most was knowing that she’d make up her face anyway. She’d already gone to the trouble of putting on the black dress that she used to think made her look good. She would smile, and she might even hold Paul’s hand as they entertained the Waldemans for the evening. Because the most important thing was pretending that everything was all right. Her life had become one of make-believe, and she was adept at the game. She peeked out the bathroom to make sure she was alone this time before popping two more diazepam into her mouth. That should get her through the night, she thought.

9:02 am: Two paramedics, dressed in dark blue trousers and red and blue rugby shirts, sprinted up the stairs.

Juliet had kept the lasagna in the oven a bit too long, and the top was black in some spots, but no one said anything about that. After the second bottle of wine, who really cared what the lasagna tasted like? Paul had picked out a nice Australian Shiraz, one that found its way easily

around the palate, settling somewhere in the back of the cheeks, right where the upper and lower jaw meet up. The mix of the wine and diazepam made Juliet feel great.

A mellowness fell over her, and if she could have thought much about it, she probably would have compared it to how she used to feel when she and Paul were younger, singler, and prettier. When they moved the party to the living room, she sat down a little too close to Paul's friend Danny. While Paul poured out glasses of a new Scottish liqueur he'd discovered, Juliet leaned toward Danny, her bare arm brushing against the sleeve of his dark gray v-neck. The mix of cotton and cashmere felt soft against her skin, and she giggled as she ran her fingers down his arm.

"I like your sweater," she slurred. "Where'd you get it?"

Darcy, Danny's wife, plopped the ass which Juliet had earlier in the evening described to Paul as "expanding like swine flu in a room full of Mexicans" down next to Juliet, sandwiching herself between the two. "It's Abercrombie," she said, baring teeth stained red by the wine and too-thin tooth enamel, clearly the result of over-bleaching.

Juliet had never found Darcy interesting or even likable. In general, she felt a natural repulsion for vapid people. The very name "Darcy" annoyed her. It sounded so... presumptuous. Further, Darcy was not her friend. Paul and Danny had been colleagues at a marketing agency a decade before and had bonded over the course of a half-dozen football seasons and several vats full of micro-brewed bock beer served in over-sized wine glasses at trendy bars in places like Bethesda. Darcy and Danny (the similarity of their names was another source of irritation to Juliet) were already married by the time Paul and Juliet started dating a couple years later. Juliet was more or less forced into being "friends" with Paul's friend's wife, listening to her chitter inanely about whatever reality TV show she was hooked on at the moment. Earlier Darcy had

spent at least a quarter of an hour expounding upon the virtues of a show about the lives of a couple and their sextuplets.

“It’s Abercrombie!” Juliet exclaimed, mimicking Darcy’s voice nasal-inflected voice. “Well, that’s special.”

Paul bent down toward Juliet and Darcy, handing them their glasses containing the dark brown liqueur. Juliet noticed his arched eyebrow and braced for one of his patented passive-aggressive remarks. He said nothing, though, turning away and retrieving drinks for himself and Danny. For some reason, the fact that Paul had chosen not to make a comment bothered her. While she might have been going through the motions for the last year or two with him, she’d always felt that he genuinely still had feelings for her. She had come to count on his jealous desire to maintain possession of her as a comfortable form of twisted love. If he didn’t care enough anymore to at least register a weak complaint at her inappropriate advance on a long-time friend, then why was she still with him?

“I like it,” Juliet continued. She reached past Darcy’s round mid-section, and ran her hand across Danny’s chest. She felt Danny tense his abdominal muscles, as if he wanted her to feel his six-pack underneath the sweater. A shiver ran through her body.

“Yes, Juliet. You already said that,” Paul said. “You like lots of things when you’ve had a little too much to drink.”

Ah, that feels better, Juliet thought. “I want to get one of these for you, Paul. As soon as you lose a few pounds.”

Paul had gained about twenty over the course of their marriage. He wasn’t yet obese, but he was overweight, though it really didn’t show much with his clothes on. It was only when she looked at his naked body that she noticed. While his gut remained relatively under control, fat

pockets had spread up his back like two enormous leeches, grafting themselves to his body from just above his hips to half-way up his ribcage. Sometimes she would inadvertently grab onto them during the rare instances when she and Paul made love, digging her fingernails into them. If she let her mind wander too much, she'd start thinking about what that fat would look like if she could peel back Paul's skin and take a peek on the inside. Would it be yellowish in color and resemble cottage cheese in consistency? Or was it white and rubbery, like the fat on a steak? More than once, she had amazed herself at all the things she could distract her mind with during sex.

At least, during sex with Paul. Maybe sex with Danny would turn out to be different. She had thought of it more and more often, and this was not the first time she had flirted with him in front of Paul. She wasn't sure why she did it, perhaps just to coax a reaction out of Paul. It wasn't like Danny was some gorgeous guy. He was hairier than her husband, which she didn't necessarily find attractive. The backs of Danny's hands were a bramble of black hairs. A few more sprouted out from where his sweater curved down toward his pecs. She had been with a few hairy men before Paul, but it had been so long now that she'd forgotten the sensation of her smooth body, slick with sweat, rubbing up against a man's hairy chest and legs. She wondered if it had bothered her back in her pre-Paul days, or if she had just gotten used to Paul's nearly bald chest. She honestly could not remember.

9:22 am: The paramedics couldn't do anything. The tall one told Paul that they had to get her to the hospital.

Juliet tried to ignore the patter of little feet through the ceiling above, but Paul had heard it too. “Your turn, Juliet,” he said, nodding slightly upward.

Juliet groaned, taking another sip of the sweet liqueur in her glass. Paul had already had to put Ellie back in her bed once during dinner. Why couldn’t those damn girls just sleep at night, like normal people? Why couldn’t she just hire a nanny, like she’d asked Paul countless times? It wasn’t like they couldn’t afford it. She was sick of having to use babysitters twice a week, tired of constantly having to plan out the girls’ days, the endless string of play dates and birthday parties... Even fat, frumpy Darcy had a nanny, for Christ’s sake!

She pushed herself up out of the couch, straightening her dress. She looked at Danny and licked her lips, then darted a quick smirk at Darcy before turning to leave the room. “I’m sorry, guys. That girl just won’t stay down. I’ll be right back.”

She stumbled toward the stairs, planting her hand on the back of Paul’s armchair as she passed by him.

“Have another one, Juliet,” he muttered.

I hate you, she thought, surprised at the unspoken yet immediate reaction of her subconscious. She moved up the stairs, gripping the creaky, wooden handrail as she went. Did she really hate her husband? If so, it was the first time she had dared think such a thing. She had accepted the fact that their once solid relationship had fallen into a sort of lull ever since Grace’s birth. She had never cheated on him, at least not physically, and as far as she knew it, he had remained faithful to her. “Faithful”. Whatever that meant. She fantasized all the time about being with other men – men she saw briefly in the supermarket, men she worked with, and strangely, Philip Seymour Hoffman, the actor whose slovenly physical appearance disgusted and attracted her at the same time.

“Philip Seymour Hoffman,” she whispered to herself, shaking her head as she pushed open the door to the girls’ bedroom. Juliet’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the scene. Bathed in the blue glow of the elephant-shaped LED nightlight resting on the small bookshelf were Ellie and Grace, playing on the floor. Ellie had set out her tea set and was pretending to serve her little sister some cream when she swung her head up toward her mother in the doorway.

“Back to bed, girls. You can play in the morning.”

Grace looked half-asleep already, listing to her right. Juliet smiled at this smaller, less drunk version of herself. She reached down and picked the girl up, placing her back in bed and pulling the covers over her. Grace’s eyes shut, and as her head hit the pillow, she was dead to the world.

“Ellie, you can’t be waking up your sister like that and playing with her. You’ll both be exhausted and cranky all day tomorrow.”

“We were just having some tea. You and Daddy and the Waldemans are doing the same thing. Why can’t we?”

Juliet ushered Ellie back into bed, wishing she had a comfortable yet tight chain with which she could strap the girl in. “Because you can’t. Now, I don’t want to hear any more shenanigans from you tonight, you hear? You stay in bed and go to sleep.”

“What are shannigans?”

“Shenanigans. Monkeyshine. Mischief.”

The little girl laughed. “Monkey shines? How does a monkey shine?”

Juliet thought about that for a moment. She smiled at the words she’d used. What exactly was the derivation of the word “shenanigan” after all? And where did the word “monkeyshine”

come from? “You’re awfully cute, you know that?” she said to her daughter. “Move over, let me snuggle with you for a minute.”

Ellie made room, and Juliet lay down beside her, brushing her hand through the girl’s mess of stringy, brown hair. From downstairs she could hear Paul and the others laughing about something, and she wondered if she could just stay upstairs with her daughters for the rest of the evening. Just minutes before, she had cursed her daughters for interrupting the dinner party, but did she really want to be down there? Here she found momentary sanctuary from the busy adult world with its \$100 bottles of after-dinner liqueurs, its fake smiles, its complicated sexual rules. Here only the tea was fake. She watched Ellie’s eyelids grow heavier until her four-year-old was asleep, the covers rising and falling slowly with her breathing. She patted the girl on her head once more and picked herself up from the bed. The few minutes with the girls had made her almost feel sober again, and she was able to tiptoe out of the room without stirring either of them. Juliet hesitated as to whether she should return to the bathroom and take another diazepam, but she figured the night was almost over anyway.

10:28 am: A red-eyed young Indian man dressed in light green scrubs found them in the waiting room.

Fortunately Darcy had not drunk too much during the evening. Juliet did not want to have to wait around all night for Danny and her to sober up enough, so that they could drive home. After coffee, Danny finally said, “Well, we oughta get going.”

What a lame line, Juliet thought. Every dinner party she had ever attended in her adult life had ended with that statement. It was as ubiquitous as hello and goodbye. It was like something that *had* to be said. She knew what Paul would say next, and he did: “Already?”

“Jake’s got practice tomorrow morning, 9 AM.”

“Ooh. Rough,” Paul responded. “So, that’s what I have to look forward to in a few years, spending my Saturday mornings driving the girls to soccer practice?”

Danny pulled on his jacket then wrapped Paul in a manly hug that Juliet always found unnecessary and brutish. “Ah, you get used to it after the fourth or fifth season.”

While this chummy interchange was occurring, Juliet was wishing Darcy would let go of her hands. She had taken both of them in hers when they reached in to exchange silly French-style cheek kisses. When had this become fashionable in America? She wondered. Was it one of the vestiges of 80s yuppie culture? She imagined this was still done regularly in parties on the Upper East Side in New York, but here in suburban DC? Was it really necessary? And why would Darcy not let go of her hands?

The fat woman leaned in toward her cheek again, and Juliet tried pulling away, thinking it utterly ridiculous that this husband’s friend’s wife was actually going to attempt a second round of cheek kisses. Darcy held firm, though. When their cheeks were a paper’s width apart, instead of kissing, she whispered, “Please don’t ever do that again.”

She let go of Juliet’s hands, and Juliet looked her in the eye. “Do what?” she asked.

Darcy pursed her lips into a thin grimace, and for a moment, Juliet thought the woman was going to cry. The men had finished their drawn-out hug and an awkward moment occurred before Danny reached toward Juliet and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek while Paul did the

same with Darcy. The women held each other's stare throughout until Danny said to his wife, "Okay, Darce? You ready to hit the road?"

She turned toward her husband and nodded, moving to the front door and out into the cool night without saying another word. Juliet watched Paul follow them. She knew he would stand there in the doorway and wave them good night, not closing up until Darcy had pushed the Cayenne into reverse and rolled out of the driveway.

Juliet picked up the glasses and carried them into the kitchen. She poured herself one more shot and threw the liquid down her throat. Turning on the tap, she rinsed each glass before placing them in the dishwasher. Dirty dinner plates were already strewn across the counter, the detritus of a ritual in which she had taken no joy. She considered leaving them until the next day, but she couldn't stand the thought of waking up with a hangover and having a pile of plates caked with pasta sauce and hardened cheese. If she spent fifteen minutes on them now, she could get them in the dishwasher and all clean for the morning. She picked up the first couple plates and put them in the sink, wetting them a bit before reaching for the dish liquid and the scrub brush.

Paul entered as she was midway through plate number two, pressing his body against the back of hers. "We can finish those in the morning, can't we?" he said. She knew from his tone what that meant. He was horny. For once, he wanted sex. Why did it seem he only wanted sex at the least opportune times? It was like somewhere on the timeline of their relationship, their sexual cravings had diverged, and they rarely ever met up anymore. She was tired, she had dishes to clean, and she should probably check on the girls once more before going to bed. Whereas libidinous thoughts had entered her mind often during the evening, she was far from "in the mood."

Then again, maybe she should just take it when she could get it. There was no sound coming from above, their friends were gone, and she could already feel how hard Paul was. She calculated the odds of his ability to arouse her fast enough before he lost his own erection, and she decided to give it a go.

8:45 am: Ellie showed Juliet the empty bottle of pills. “But we were just pretending they were candy. I only gave her a few,” she said.

Juliet sat down on the bed next to Grace’s already cold body and wiped away the vomit stains that had crusted at the corners of her daughter’s mouth.

Sniffing Glue

The big man's arm had become a sweat-sheathed club, pounding Azizi's shoulder, his neck, his head. Azizi had already crumpled to the floor, the dirty wooden boards shaking and creaking as Cornelius rained down blows on the boy.

"You steal from me? You steal from me?" he bellowed, his hot breath filling the boy's nostrils. Azizi pulled himself into the fetal position, waiting for the blow that would kill him.

Azizi could barely even feel the hits anymore. They were coming too fast. Cornelius was kneeling over him now, using both fists, slamming them into his ribs. Azizi knew if he survived he would be pissing blood for days, but that was nothing new.

Just go ahead and kill me, he thought. His ears were ringing, and he waited to pass out, as he usually did during Cornelius' beatings.

But Cornelius stopped. The muffled chime of his cell phone, coming from the pocket of his vest, had given him pause. He stood up and gave the boy a final kick in the groin before fishing out the phone.

Azizi lay still on the floor, sneaking a peek toward his boss. Cornelius looked at the phone number on his phone and grumbled, letting it ring four more times as he tried to catch his breath. Then he grimaced and pushed a button. "Yes, Bwana John! *Habari za leo?*"

Cornelius nodded and smiled, as if the *mzungu* were standing in front of him and not just on the other end of the line. "Yes, I know about the electricity, bwana. It is out all over the neighborhood. There is nothing I can do. I called TANESCO already. They say it will be back on by six. Yes, half an hour from now. Yes, yes. Okay, *asante sana. Asante.*"

Cornelius snapped the phone off, the smile melting away as he turned back to the boy at his feet. “Get up!”

Azizi attempted to rise, but his body refused to respond. The big man leaned over and scooped him up, setting him on wobbly legs. “We will finish this discussion later. Now I need you to go up the pole and flip the switch. I told the *mzungu* he’d have his power by six, so go and flip it.”

*

The pole was over thirty feet high with thick, rusty nails running up its length, allowing someone who did not weigh too much to scale it. Cornelius could never do it. The nails would fall out, or the whole pole would just tumble over under his weight. That is why Cornelius had Azizi. He could do things Cornelius could not, like scale electrical poles. Azizi began to climb the pole, something he did several times a week. It was always the same: climb the pole, flip the switch. On to off. Off to on. Cornelius had been stealing electricity for years from the electric company, providing his compound and that of his rental house next door with free power. To avoid detection, he usually shut it off several hours each day, waiting for the American volunteer who rented the house to leave for the day, then switching it back on before he returned at night. Then he’d have the boy climb back up the pole at two in the morning and shut off the power again until dawn. This particular *mzungu* had been in the house two months already, and he was starting to get suspicious. But what was he going to do? Call the police? This was Tanzania.

Azizi arrived at the top, clutching his ribs with one arm, reaching up to the breaker switch with his other as his legs hugged the wood. He had been afraid of climbing the pole the first few times he’d had to do it. He had preferred doing it in the dark. At least then he could not see how

high he was. Now, though, it did not faze him. He had done it countless times. It was just one of his many tasks, no different from cleaning out the toilets or burning the garbage.

Azizi flipped the switch back on and took a moment to look around. From his vantage point, he could see across the street, down into the narrow passageways running between the ramshackle huts of Cornelius' poorer neighbors. He saw children his age with pails full of water on their heads, walking from the well back home to help their mothers cook dinner. The women were lining the dirt road with their small makeshift grills, hot coals already cooking maize. Foot traffic was heavy this time of the evening as the men returned from a day of work in the nearby fields. At least, those who were lucky enough to have a job. Half of them were out of work and spent their days in town just waiting for a shopkeeper to offer them a few hundred shillings to unload some boxes.

He could see into the *mzungu*'s compound too. The *mzungu* was tall and white and had blue eyes and was always smiling, except lately, Azizi noticed, when he was talking to Cornelius. He could tell the *mzungu* didn't like Cornelius, and for that reason he felt a certain kinship with the white man. Sometimes Cornelius would order Azizi to pick up the garbage piled up in the old barrel just inside the gates at the man's house, and Azizi always tried to talk with the man. But Azizi only knew how to say "good morning" in English and really wasn't even sure what that meant. Sometimes, usually when the man was going off to work, he would respond "good morning," but then at other times during the day when Azizi would try out the English phrase, the *mzungu* would look at him funny and say something else that sounded similar, but with a different last word. He could never make out what the *mzungu* was saying, though, so he would usually just smile and repeat his "good morning."

Sometimes Azizi would allow himself to dream and imagine he worked for the *mzungu* and that one day the *mzungu* would take him to America and let him work for him there. Azizi was sure the toilets there must be better. And the garbage, the wonderful garbage! If the *mzungu*'s trash pile was any indicator, America must be a place where everyone had more than enough to eat. Azizi loved picking through the man's trash, always finding food like fried rice and pieces of chicken still on the bone. He had gotten drunk on a half-bottle of wine the man had left out one day, the first time he had tasted it. It was a little sour, but he drank it fast and it gave him such a warm feeling. Every time he went to pick up the garbage, he hoped to find another bottle of that intoxicating concoction.

"What are you still doing up there, you lazy lout! Get down here!"

Azizi looked down and saw the fat man glaring at him, arms akimbo. Azizi snapped back to reality and started down the pole. I have to get out of here, he thought as he shuffled to the ground. If only I had someplace I could go. But there was nowhere for someone like him. He couldn't go back to his village. His mother could barely feed his younger brothers and sisters as it was, and at 12 he was already too old to rely on her anymore. He missed her most at night when he climbed the pole and imagined under a starlit sky that he could see all the way to the family hut, that she was awake and thinking of him too. He imagined leaping off the pole and flying home.

He had friends in town, glue sniffers who begged from tourists and stole whenever they could. Sniffing glue was akin to a slow death in Tanzania, and Azizi did not want to end up like them. So what choice did he have but to stay with Cornelius?

“The *mzungu* called again. He says there’s a leak in the kitchen. Get over there and check it out. Don’t do anything. Just look at it for a few minutes. Pretend you know what you’re doing. Don’t say anything to him. Just look at the leak and then come back here. You understand?”

Azizi nodded and began to head for the gate.

“Wait! Get back here,” Cornelius said. “You can’t go out like that. You look like you were run over by a truck. Clean your face off and change into your other shirt. Then go!”

Azizi did as he was told. He shuffled off to the little room where he slept -- when he slept -- and picked up his second shirt, balled up in a corner. It really was no better than the one he was wearing. Both were filthy, torn tee-shirts with English writing on them he did not understand. He carefully slipped out of the first and dragged the second one on, trying to ignore the fresh bruises on his chest and arm.

*

The *mzungu* opened the metal gate and looked down at the crumpled boy before him. “*Habari gani?*”

Azizi smiled. The *mzungu*’s Swahili had gotten marginally better since he had arrived in Tanzania a couple months ago. Azizi answered with the usual response, “*Nzuri.*” Even if one is not doing well, one always responds, “Fine.” The Swahili language has a myriad different ways of saying, “No problem.” *Hamna shida, hamna noma, hakuna matata...* Even when there is a problem, it’s best not to talk about it.

Azizi wished he could talk about it, but even if he tried, the *mzungu* wouldn’t understand him. How could he tell this big white angel that he needed to be carried off from there, released

from Cornelius' killing grip, taken to America where the trash was more nourishing than his average dinner?

The *mzungu* asked him something in his language, and Azizi just nodded, figuring he was asking if he was there to look at the sink. As he led Azizi into the house, he chattered on in English. Doesn't he know I don't understand anything he's saying? Azizi thought.

He had never been in the house before. When he walked into the kitchen, he was awed. The *mzungu*'s glass cupboards were full of food – bright yellow cereal boxes, bags of rice and sugar, jars containing dark red sauces... and candy bars. A stack of them was sitting there on a counter, at least a dozen.

As he stared at the candy, the *mzungu* said something, gesturing toward the chocolate stack. Azizi wasn't sure of his meaning. The *mzungu* repeated whatever it was he was saying, then said, "Unataka?"

Do I want one? Was he really asking Azizi if he wanted one of his candy bars? Well, answer him! "Ndiyo," Azizi said quietly.

The *mzungu* reached for one and handed it to Azizi, who avoided eye contact with the *mzungu*. He slipped it into his pocket and mumbled his thanks. The *mzungu* responded, "*Karibu*", or "Welcome." Though Azizi knew better than to show any outward emotion toward the stranger, inside he was leaping for joy. He had never had a candy bar in his life, though he'd seen others eating them. He couldn't wait to get out of the house so he could devour it.

Remembering the reason for his visit, he looked at the kitchen sink. A fine mist was spitting out from the hot water tap. Azizi turned on the water, attempted to tighten the tap to see if the leak would stop. He opened the cabinet under the sink and pretended to examine the pipes.

He tapped a U-shaped pipe a couple times, wondering what else he should do before scampering out of the *mzungu*'s house.

The *mzungu* asked him something, and for a moment Azizi thought he might be asking if he wanted another candy bar. But no, he was pointing to the tap. Azizi screwed up his face, trying to look smart and in control. All he felt was stupid, though, and he could see that the *mzungu* knew he didn't know what he was doing. Azizi once again avoided eye contact with the tall man, mumbled something about reporting the leak to Cornelius, and started heading off to the exit. From behind him, he could hear the *mzungu* let out a slight chuckle then say something out of the side of his mouth. White men were always saying things out of the side of their mouths. I don't understand what you're saying, *mzungu*, but I'm not dumb. I know you're saying something bad about me. You're right, though. I am useless. Azizi walked, his head bowed, to the gate and let himself out. The *mzungu* called out something that sounded like "*Asante*," and Azizi waved to him.

He waited for the gate to close behind him before ripping the candy bar out of his pocket and tearing the plastic wrapper, tossing it into a bush. He looked at the candy in his hand, examining it in the light of the floodlight on top of the *mzungu*'s wall. The bar was a few inches long, smooth on all sides except its top, where a swirling ridge running the length of the bar indicated how the chocolate, when still liquid, had dropped onto the inner confection, hardening into its current pattern when cooled. Azizi licked the bar, unsure of the proper technique to eat it. The chocolate was too hard, though, and he didn't taste anything, so he decided to dive in, chomping down on the treat.

It was nearly overwhelming, that first bite. Things in his mouth, sweet and chewy things that he had never tasted before, and others that were familiar and crunchy. As his tongue played

with the bit in his mouth, he looked at the inside of the candy bar. Wrapped inside the chocolate were two layers, the bottom grayish and mushy, the top stretchy and light brown, and there were chopped peanuts mixed in with the top part. He dug a dirty fingernail into the gray part, wanting to taste each element individually. The gray part didn't have much taste, but the brown stuff was delicious, creamy and sweet. He decided it was best, though, when all mixed together, and he bit off another big piece, chewing slowly, allowing it all to swim around in his mouth, savoring it as long as he could before swallowing. Two-thirds of the bar was already gone, and he thought of saving the rest for later, but he wasn't sure he could hold himself back.

He was just about to pop the last bit in his mouth when a shadowy force stepped out of nowhere and swatted him into the wall. The rest of the candy went flying into the dirt, and Azizi looked up to see Cornelius standing over him. "Where did you get that? Did you steal that too?"

Azizi stayed down on the ground, his back against the wall. "No, no, the *mzungu*... he gave it to me!"

"That *mzungu* didn't give it to you! You stole it. Don't lie to me, boy."

He started to protest, then stopped. He knew there was no use in trying to tell Cornelius what happened. He would never believe him. Azizi stood up, dusting himself off, eyeing the last piece of his candy bar lying in the dirt. Cornelius asked him what had happened in the house, and Azizi explained the leaky faucet, and how he had done as he was told, pretending to examine the leak.

Cornelius forgot about the candy bar as he pondered what to do about the leak. He had no desire to enter the man's house and fix it himself, yet he did not want to pay a plumber to come over at this hour. He'd take care of it tomorrow, maybe. What was the *mzungu* going to do about

it, anyway? “Come on! Get back to the house. And if you ever steal anything from the *mzungu* again, I will beat you to death, you understand?”

Azizi nodded and waited for Cornelius to turn back to the house. As soon as he did so, Azizi reached down and snatched the rest of his candy bar. It was only partially covered in dirt, and he wiped off a couple ants and most of the dirt before pushing it into his mouth. The remaining dirt added a certain amount of unpleasantness to the otherwise tasty treat, but he couldn't let it go to waste. Besides, he'd eaten worse.

*

That night Azizi could not sleep. That pile of candy bars danced in his head. He could almost taste it again, that sweetness on the tongue, the satisfaction in his belly. He decided no matter what, he needed another. He needed something good.

The guard came in at two as he did every night, and Azizi sprang up from the floor and headed out to the electrical pole, scrambling up to cut the power in the white man's house. The moon shown full, and it cast a glow over the *mzungu*'s house below. From his perch on high, Azizi imagined he could see through the clay-tiled roof, right into the kitchen, to the pile of candy bars on the counter. There, he could see it perfectly, lit by moonglow, those brown plastic packages with the colorful wording across the top, neatly stacked, calling to him.

And he got an idea. He knew Cornelius kept a spare set of keys to the *mzungu*'s house in his office. Azizi shimmied back down the pole, said good night to the guard, and instead of returning to his room, he slinked down the hall and into the office. Hanging on a row of hooks was a set of keys marked “B House,” the term Cornelius used when speaking of the rental. Azizi slipped the keys from the hook, making sure they didn't clang together. He could hear Cornelius

snoring in the room just down the hall. If Azizi woke him, he was sure he would not see the light of day.

Azizi tiptoed out of the office and back to the front door. Peering out a window, he saw the guard had returned to his post and promptly had fallen back to sleep. He undid the locks on the door and slowly opened it, just enough to slip outside. Electricity pulsed through his body as he made his way to the main gate, carefully maneuvering through the gravel courtyard, eyeing the sleeping guard, slumped over in his chair. He pulled the latch of the gate and again opened it just wide enough to slip through, leaving it open a crack behind him.

He hustled to the *mzungu*'s gate and listened for sounds of the *mzungu*'s guard. His crazy hunger for the candy bar grew with every moment, and he decided to risk it. He slipped the key into the gate and turned it, hoping the gate would not squeak upon opening it. It did, but not much, and Azizi was inside the door in another moment. He darted an eye toward the guard's post, but he wasn't there. That meant the guard was making rounds. The *mzungu*'s compound wasn't as big as Cornelius', so the guard could reappear at any moment. Azizi made for the front door, fifteen meters away. He was there in a flash, checking for the guard. No sign of him, and Azizi fumbled with the keys, finding the right pair that fit in the two locks on the door. Just as he got the second key in the door, he heard a shuffling from the side of the house and saw a flashlight's beam pointed toward the front wall. The guard was coming back. Azizi turned the key, and the door gave. In another second, he was in, just as the guard's beam flashed toward where he had been standing.

Azizi hit the floor, his back against the door, his palms resting on the cool porcelain tile. He pressed himself against the door as he heard the guard's footsteps approaching. If the guard tried the door, he would see that it was unlocked, and that would mark the end of Azizi. The

footsteps stopped a few paces away, though, and Azizi let out a sigh as he heard the guard's feet crunching gravel back toward his post.

He'd made it this far. He slid across the entryway floor toward the kitchen. The water was flowing more strongly from the fissure in the tap now, but Azizi hardly noticed. He got to his feet and turned to the counter, wondering how many candy bars he could eat before getting sick.

Reaching with his hand in the darkness of the kitchen, he strained to find the candy bars. But they were gone. It was inconceivable. They had been right where his hand was now sweeping over the counter. They just weren't there anymore. They had to be somewhere, though. After all, the *mzungu* could not have eaten them all.

Azizi scuttled about in the darkness, opening cabinets, searching everywhere for the missing candy. He was frantic, and in his haste, he was careless. Reaching about in one of the cabinets, he inadvertently knocked over a jar of sauce, which tumbled out, crashing open on the counter. Red sauce splattered up at him, hitting him in the face, on his shirt. The flashlight beamed on, swinging from the guard post toward the front door of the house. The light was pointed directly at him now, and he stumbled backwards, hitting his back on the sink. Now there was the fast patter of bare feet on tile, the awakened *mzungu* coming his way.

Azizi sprinted out of the kitchen and to the back door, whipping open the latch and bolting out into the back garden. He heard the *mzungu* shouting, but Azizi was too fast. He flew to the far wall at the back of the garden and scaled it. Once atop, he ran along it until coming to a banana tree growing on the other side, throwing himself onto the meaty stalk, then sliding down to the ground. He was in Cornelius' yard again. He could hear the *mzungu* and his guard still yelling on the other side of the wall, and he ran back to the house, slipped back into his room and

hoped no one would figure out it had been he. He lay down and tried to stop his body from shaking.

*

It was still dark when the boy was awakened by a swift and heavy kick to his back. He turned to see Cornelius' hulking frame. "I've had it with you, boy! You've caused me enough trouble. You're nothing but a thief, and after I've finished, you'll be just another dead thief!"

Azizi folded himself up in the corner of his room and cried out, "No, please, bwana! No! I'm sorry I went into the *mzungu*'s house! I was just... hungry. Please don't hurt me anymore."

Cornelius was surprised by the child's words. He wasn't used to Azizi pleading like that. Usually he just took his beatings like a man. In a way, Cornelius had come to respect the boy for never begging or crying. His momentary surprise resulted in his hesitation before resuming the beating, and Azizi, who had been braced for the next kick, opened an eyelid and saw the man had stopped. Azizi recognized his chance, and scurried around Cornelius toward the door. Cornelius had just enough time to swing his beefy arm toward the boy, clubbing him on the shoulder as he skirted past.

Azizi ran out the front door of the house, but the old guard was up now and standing next to the *mzungu* and his own guard, all firmly planted in front of the gate. He ran instinctively to the electrical pole and started to climb. Cornelius stomped out of the house as the others now joined him at the base of the pole. Azizi clambered to the top in a matter of seconds and looked down to see Cornelius waving his arms and yelling at him. "You get down here right now, or I'll knock this pole down, and you with it, you good for nothing thief!"

Next to Cornelius, the *mzungu* was laughing. *What was so funny?* Azizi wondered. *Doesn't he know I'm going to die now? Doesn't he understand? All I wanted was a candy bar. All I wanted was a little something good in my life.*

Azizi gripped the pole while Cornelius babbled on in English to the *mzungu*. The air was cool on his skin, the full moon glowing overhead. He looked out at the quiet dwellings across the street and at the distant lights of the town center. He thought of the poor men in their huts, dreaming of a few shillings' pay in the morning. He pictured the street boys in town, passed out on the sidewalk, sleeping with the dogs. He let his mind drift long and far. The last thing he saw before he let go of the pole was his mother's face. And he smiled.

Point of View

Ewla Garner is sick. She called the parish office in the afternoon, and I told her I would run the Cradle Catholics basket down to Anacostia.

I hear the St. James kids call lots of things “ghetto”. To them, it means wearing last year’s style of jacket. They have no idea. Ghetto is a neighborhood like Anacostia, with no grocery store chains or family restaurants because of one of the highest violent crime levels in a city known for its violent crimes. It’s a place where I frankly shouldn’t be going alone, especially at night. But I think to myself, if Ewla Garner can do this every week, I can fill in for her once.

I drive around the block twice before coming to a stop in front of Mother House, a squat two-story building across the street from an abandoned apartment complex, its cracked sidewalk littered with broken glass and weeds.

Stephon say he sick, but I know he just don’t wanna go to school, and ain’t no problem. I don’t wanna go neither.

He say he wan’ go down to the park, shoot some hoop, and I say, How you goin do that if you so sick?

He just smile, and we shoot fo while, but not neither of us is no good, and the older ones, who hang out all the time, they better, meaner, don’t give a shit about us, kick us off the court every time we try and get in the game.

So we walkin back, neither of us wan go home, ain’t much waitin for us there. He been stayin with us ever since his moms had to go away. My moms likes Stephon.

We watch this blue Mercedes swing by, and I know right away they don’t belong here, whoever it is. She some old white lady, Driving Miss Daisy, Stephon says.

Two figures in puffy jackets and baseball caps pulled low over their eyes stand on the street corner, and I know they're wondering what the white lady in the late-model car is doing in their neighborhood.

It's nearly dark by the time I arrive, and the streetlights aren't working. I get out of my car and open the back door as fast as I can. I am an easy target, I know. The boys cross the street, heading right toward me.

"Yo, you need some help, ma'am?" one calls from the middle of the road.

"If you could give me a hand with this, I'd appreciate it," I say, tugging at the blue basket which is wedged into my backseat. I hope I don't sound scared.

The boys come around to my end of the car. I stop what I'm doing and smile at them. Up close I can see they're both no older than fifteen.

"What you doin' here?" the first boy says from under a red New York Yankees baseball cap.

I don't know who that is. She looks at us out of the corner of her eye, drivin by a second time. Then she do somethin stupid. She parks. Who is this stupid ol white lady, and what the hell is she doin around here? She askin for trouble.

Stephon, he like to play, and he say, let's go mess with her. He already crossin the road by the time I can say just leave the poor lady alone. I figure I better step in before he go off gettin us in trouble. Before he can do anythin, I call out, tryin to sound like not confrontational or nothin.

She cool, this old lady. Man, I be her, I be scared o me and Stephon comin toward us. Maybe she can see, though. Maybe we look like we just got kicked off the court. We ain't gangstas, lady.

I don't know what to do now. She got somethin she tryin to get outta her back seat, somethin that's stuck. Stephon give me a look, with that funny smile he got, like he sayin you believe this shit?

I see Stephon thinkin about jackin this lady's car right now, and I admit it'd

The second one wears a blue and black ski cap with a Washington Wizards logo on it. I notice how he is eyeing my car.

“You know that house there?” I ask, pointing to Mother House.

“Yeah, that’s where the pregnant girls go,” Wizards Hat says, his face breaking into a big smile.

“That’s right. I’m delivering some things. Could you help me?”

Red Yankees shrugs a shoulder and begins to pull at the basket. He tells his friend to go around to the other side of the car and push, and in a few seconds they wrench it free. Wizards Hat crawls through my backseat and emerges holding the basket on one end. They bring it up to the front door of the home, and I follow, after closing and locking all of my car doors.

I ring the bell, but Red Yankees only laughs.

“That beal ain’t gonna work! You gotta knock. They home, but they ain’t gonna hear no beal.”

be real easy. But somethin bout her seem like she might be stronger than she looks.

She tells us she goin to the pregnant girls house with whatever it is she got there in her car. Stephon think it’s funny that so many pregnant girls go to that house. He like hangin around it, watchin them come and go wit their bellies gettin bigger. Me, I feel kinda sorry for them. I know a coupla them already. One, Whitney, she a sweet girl, a couple years older than me. Fat as a whale now.

This white lady, she can’t git the thing outta her car and she asks us to help, an I got nothin better to do, so why not? Stephon don’t look like he wanna help, but I tell him to go over round the other side of the car and help me.

It some kinda basket full of diapers and some baby clothes and shit like that, and it’s really big and I just wonder who this lady is. But we get the thing out and bring it up to the front door with her following behind us.

I do knock, and in a moment a young woman comes to the door. Her eyes go wide when she sees me with the boys. “Yes?” she says through a glass screen door.

“Hi, I’m Marianne Burgin, from St. James, in Bethesda.”

“Oh, right,” the woman responds, opening the door. “Ewla okay?”

“A little under the weather, actually. But I’m sure she’ll be fine soon.”

The woman nods. “I hope so. She’s a good lady.”

The boys step in, and she instructs them to set it down in the corridor. The paint, a maroonish color, is flaking off the walls, and bare light bulbs overhead give the whole place a harsh feel. I can hear a baby crying somewhere within, and pots and pans clanging. The woman does not say much else, and in another moment, I head back outside, the two boys in tow. Wizards Hat whispers something to Red Yankees, who shushes his friend.

This basket is heavy, and I’m tryin to act cool like it ain’t no thing, but if someone don’t open the door pretty soon, I’m gonna drop the whole thing on Stephon’s foot, and that’s all he need, cuz he already walk a little funny. But finally the door opens and we can see it’s Miss Carmen. She in charge. She give me an Stephon a look like what game you boys playin wit this ol lady?

I just try to look like I belong there. She be talkin to the lady, and me and Stephon put the basket down in the hall there. I look around, see if I can see Whitney, but I hear some people in the back somewhere, but that’s it. Smells like they got somethin goin on the stove, maybe some soup or somethin. Smells good, and I’m glad for the pregnant girls that at least they got some good-smellin soup for dinner, and now they got all these diapers too.

But Miss Carmen, she finish talkin to the lady, and we all walk out together. Stephon tells me we oughta ask the lady

“What are your names?” I ask them
as we arrive at my car.

“Anthony.” Red Yankees.

“Stephon.” Wizards Hat.

“Well, thank you for helping me.
I’d like to offer you something for your
trouble. Can I do that?”

“No trouble, ma’am. Ain’t nothin’
but carryin’ a box fiddayn feet,” Anthony
says.

“All the same, thank you for
helping,” I say, reaching into my purse.

“Nah, you don’t need to pay us,
f’ real.”

Stephon’s eyes bulge out of his
sockets and he is about to say something
before Anthony gives him a look that
keeps him silent.

I nod. “All right. Thank you again.
Have a good evening.”

They both mumble something that
sounds like “you too”, and I get into my
car. They stand next to my window and
watch as I drive off. I watch in my rear
view mirror as Anthony and Stephon

for some money, at least, for our trouble. I
tell him shut up.

I think this lady must be the
luckiest person in the world, cuz she just
drove right into this messed-up
neighborhood where she the only white
person for miles, and she old and shit too,
and she obviously got some money, cuz
she got this nice Merc and she wearin this
nice leather coat and she got soft skin, at
least it looks soft, and it’s like she ain’t
had too much bad shit happen to her in her
life, but I don’t know maybe rich people
got bad shit that messes them up too, but I
ain’t sure.

And now she wanna know if she
can pay us, and I’m thinkin yeah, maybe
we should take her money. Stephon’s
ready for payday. But I kinda like the
feelin that I just did it to help her, and if I
take her money now, that don’t seem right.
So, I say no, and Stephon’s pissed, and I
do feel bad, cuz he could really use a
couple bucks. But naw. Not this time,
Steph.

become puffy shadows, before
disappearing entirely into the gloom.

*

I am walking to St. James. As I cross
through the schoolyard toward the church
entry, I see someone standing outside the
doors. A few children run about, playing
before the school bells will call them in for
class, but the figure by the church is too
big to still be in elementary school. The
puffy jacket and baseball cap make me
think it is one of the Anacostia boys I met
the week before, but I can't imagine what
they would be doing in Bethesda. I see the
"NY" stitching on the red cap and the
same pair of furtive eyes peeking out from
under the large brim. Anthony. Though
dressed the same, the boy looks softer, a
little scared and out of his natural element.

I approach and he gives me a
nonchalant nod, jutting his chin slightly
forward. I smile and say hello.

"You remember me?" he asks.

She gets in her car and drives off,
and Stephon's groanin. I wonder what it
must look like from where she is, drivin
away from here.

*

I just want to see what school's like where
that white lady lives. She said she was
from St. James in Bethesda, and I find my
way there. Two metro trains and a bus. I
jumped the turnstile for the metro, but it
ain't cuz I ain't got no money. I got a little
bit. Just don't feel like payin.

I'm watchin my breath in the cold
air, hangin outside the church doors, tryin
to look like I belong here. All these little
white kids are runnin around. They
backpacks and lunch boxes is everywhere
on the ground, like these boys and girls
don't look worried that anybody goin take
em from em.

Then I see the lady and she walkin
toward me now, and I'm thinkin why did I
come here again? She gonna think I'm
crazy. I think about leavin, just walkin

“Anthony.”

“Yeah.” He stands kicking at invisible stones on the sidewalk.

“How did you get here?”

“Bus.”

“Do you... can I help you?”

“I was just... wonderin’ what this place looked like, this church an’ Bethesda an’ shit.”

I smile at the dropped swear word. A flash of realization that he has just cursed in front of this old lady passes across his face, but then it’s gone and replaced by his usual look of passivity. I cannot possibly understand what has possessed Anthony to make his way across town, what he thought he would find when he arrived. I notice Dan Bartel, the Phys Ed teacher, hustling toward us, surely worried that the church secretary is being mugged by some punk kid. He waves at me and calls out a “How are ya, Marianne?”

away, but it’s too late. Old lady’s already here.

She wearin another coat, not the leather one. This one’s light blue, like the color they dress little babies in. It makes her look younger. Not like a baby younger, but just younger than she is.

Usually when people talk to me – old people, white people – they treat me like I’m stupid. They have this voice like they’re talkin to a baby or somethin. But this lady, she got a way. I knew it the other day when she asked me and Stephon for help. She cool. For an old, white lady.

When this other whitey come over though, I figure he goin tell me to get out, get lost. He goin bald and he got that kinda scraggly hair that looks like white people pubes on his head. It come to a point in the middle and I feel sick just lookin at his pubic head.

The lady, like I said, she cool, though. She acts like she knew I was comin, like I’s meetin her for tea or some shit. She tells him we goin to church. The

I respond with a smile and a nod.
“I’m fine, Dan. I was just going to show
Anthony here the church.”

Anthony tenses up under his puffy
jacket, ready to bolt. How many times, I
wonder, has this boy been chased away by
white adults who were not necessarily
racist yet did nothing to try and discover
who he was? I whisper to Anthony, “It’s
okay.”

Dan nods, and the school bells ring.
He moves away to gather the children
together, and I look at Anthony.

“Would you like me to show you
the church? You don’t have to go in if you
don’t want to.”

“Y’all is Cath’lic?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Baptist.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Same God,
different religion.”

He shrugs, and I gesture for him to
follow me. He jumps to the front, though,
reaching the heavy wooden door before
me. He pulls it open, and I am surprised at

man just kinda gives me a look, like he
ain’t sure what’s up, but he ain’t trustin it’s
good.

Marianne. That’s what he called
her. I remember now, that’s what she said
her name was the other day at the home.
She been nice, and now if she wants to
show me the church, I guess I’ll go. I got
nothin better to be doin.

The beal is like a fire beal. It goes
off and all the kids go runnin to the doors,
pickin up their bags and lunchboxes. I see
one black kid, but he ain’t dressed like me.
I wonder if he ever been to Anacostia.

She goin bring me in the church
now, and I hope she don’t think she goin
convert me or anythin, ‘cuz I ain’t there
for religion. I don’t know why zactly I
came, but I know it ain’t for religion. But
she says somethin funny bout Catholics
and Baptists havin the same God, and I
reckon she ain’t lookin to save my soul or
nothin, so yeah, what the hell, lady. Show
me your church.

I act polite and open the door for

the ease with which it opens for him. I always have such trouble. Maybe I'm just not as strong as I used to be.

I thank him as he holds the door for me, and he follows me inside. He spies the blue basket, empty after Ewla's visit the day before. He points to it, and I nod, smiling. We pass through the second set of doors and stand in the back. I bless myself with holy water.

He looks like he wants to ask me what I'm doing, but whether he is silenced by the foreign church or because he doesn't want to sound stupid, I do not know.

I want to ask Anthony what he's looking for, why he has come. I want to know why he isn't in school and where Stephon is. But I think to myself that if he wants to tell me, he will. For the moment, I should just show him where I work.

We walk up the center aisle, all the way to the altar. His right hand brushes the top of each pew as he passes by. A girl dressed in the long white robe of an altar

her. It's a big ol wooden door with this old, black ring instead of a knob. I pull it hard, thinkin it's goin to be stuck, but it come open easy and I hold the door for her before I follow her in. That basket I helped her with is sittin on the floor in a corner. I don't know why, but I point at it, like I'm surprised and happy to see the basket. I feel stupid after, but she smiles at me.

The lady puts the holy water on herself and I think that's funny cuz I thought it was only stuff they did in movies. Like I saw this old movie once where this guy is the devil, and he walks into a church and makes the water in the little dish boil, just by dipping his hand in it.

We start walkin up the aisle, and it smells in here, not a bad smell, but just different from my church. This place smells a little sweet, a little tangy, like my eyes are goin water if I stay too long in here. But like they goin water in a good way. The wood benches are all shiny, like if they get waxed every Saturday before

server walks out of the sacristy. In her right hand is a long, brass pole. At its tip is a wick with which she lights the altar candles. A small bell curves downward a few inches from the tip of the pole. At the end of the mass, she will use it to snuff out the candles. Anthony and I take seats in one of the front pews, and while I kneel down to say a short prayer, he watches the girl glide across the altar, lighting the candles.

Parishioners begin arriving for mass, and I ask Anthony if he wants to stay, or if he would prefer to go back outside. He shrugs, making no move to leave, so I take it he won't mind staying.

I wonder what it must be like for this young man, surrounded by a group of old, white people in a foreign church far removed from his neighborhood. He sits quietly, following my lead on the standing and kneeling portions. He makes no move to receive Communion, just shifting his legs against the pew to let me by.

the Sunday services. My boots don't make any noise, because this thick red carpet makes everything quiet.

I notice the quiet most of all. Even this girl in this white robe lightin candles up on the altar, it like she ain't even touching the ground. She like a ghost or an angel or something, just floatin around up there in her robe.

The lady kneels down and prays, but I just keep watchin the girl with her curly, blonde hair and her white robe and the way she don't never touch the ground.

When the lady asks me if I wanna stay for services, I think why not. Came all this way. Might as well stay for the show. See what it's all about, see if these folks got more to be thankful for than me. They should. I mean, look at em here. They all dressed nice. They men and women, and they all old and still together an shit. The priest, he old too. They all shufflin up to get their Communion, and it's kinda weird, but if that's they thing, it's all good. They look happy.

Back outside after mass, we walk across the courtyard to the parish office. One of the children has left a red rubber ball on the ground. It totters back and forth, as if the child just left a moment ago and it has not yet come to rest. Anthony bends down and picks it up, bouncing it like a basketball. As we approach the sidewalk in front of the office, he turns and tosses it back in the direction of where he picked it up. He is silent the entire time.

At the door, I ask him if he'd like a cup of coffee, and he shakes his head.

"Naw, I think I'm gonna head back."

"All right. You're welcome any time, Anthony. Thank you for coming."

He mumbles something I cannot understand, his half-closed eyes looking at something I can't see. I watch for a moment as he turns and walks toward River Road, and I unlock the office door.

Kathy, the parish accountant and my officemate, is huffing and puffing

Whole thing only takes no more than thirty minutes. I had games o' Madden that lasted longer than this service. I think maybe I oughta convert after all.

We walk back outside and I can see my breath again. Some kid left a ball on the ground, so I pick it up, dribble it a bit. I put it between my legs a couple times to see if I can impress the lady. I don't think she notices. We get to a house with a sign that says parish office on it.

I gots to go, I tell her, and I don't know why I say that, cuz I really got nowhere to be. But she thanks me for stoppin by, and I can't right think of anythin to say, so I just kinda say thank you and walk off. After a few steps, I start joggin out toward the bus stop.

Some fat lady comin toward me holdin a purse. When she sees me, I think I scare her with my joggin, or somethin because she alla sudden starts holdin her purse like a football, and she move faster

when she slips into the office a few minutes later.

She tucks two fingers between the door blinds and peers through, grunting a “good morning”.

“Everything all right, Kathy?” I ask.

“Some thug,” she whispers, still peering out through the blinds. “Hanging out by the bus stop.”

“Maybe he has to, you know, catch a bus.”

“No, you should’ve seen this guy. He doesn’t look like he’s from around here.”

“How so?”

“You know, big puffy jacket.”

She tilts her head toward me, enough that I can see her eyes go wide as she aspirates the word, “Black.”

“Oh,” I whisper back. “You mean-”

No sooner has she peeked again outside when she cries out, “Shh! He’s coming this way!”

toward the office. I just keep on movin by her. No sense gettin myself in any trouble round here.

At the bus stop I’m alone for a minute till a Mexican woman arrives. She got two big ol plastic bags in her hands, and I know she gotta be a maid or cleanin lady for all these rich folks in their big-ass houses around here. She probably don’t even speak English, and I feel kinda bad for her. I mean, I might not got much money or nothin, but at least I ain’t cleanin rich folks homes.

I’m waitin for the bus with the Mexican woman, and I get this idea in my head. I didn’t know really, why I came all the way out here to Bethesda to visit this old lady at her church, but maybe now I got myself an idea.

So, I turn away from the bus stop and start to head back toward the parish office. Across the schoolyard, I can hear noises comin from all those white kids in their classrooms, learnin geography and how to count money and about Abraham

“Oh, let me see,” I say, pulling my chair away from my desk and moving right toward the door.

I look outside. Anthony is shuffling up the driveway. I can’t see his eyes under his baseball cap, but his head sweeps low to the left and right, as if he’s checking to see if anyone is following him. He has his hands buried deep in the pockets of his puffy jacket, the cuffs of his baggy jeans dragging along the asphalt. As he approaches, he seems to walk more and more slowly, as if he isn’t sure what to do once he arrives.

“Lock the door!” Kathy cries, her voice ready to crack.

“Oh, shut up!” I yell back. “Shut up, shut up, shut up! You don’t even know him! Stop assuming he’s here to rob us.”

I open the door before Anthony even has a chance to decide whether to knock. He looks up from under his cap, staring at the two of us in the doorway.

“Would you like to come in, Anthony?”

Lincoln an shit. Must be nice. Better than any school I ever known, I bet.

Out here in the cold, I’m walkin away from the woman from Mexico, who’s probably wonderin why she’s freezin her ass off here for these white people every day, carryin cleanin products around on dirty metrobuses.

I’m not too far away now from the office, and I can hear they’s yellin inside, and I can’t imagine who it is, but I think one of the voices is the lady Marianne, and I think that’s weird, because I really can’t imagine her gettin mad at anybody enough to yell at em.

The lady surprises me by swingin the door open just when I get up to it. Fo a second, I just stand there, lookin in at her. She with the fat lady from earlier, the one who holds her purse like a football when someone like me walks by. Fat lady looks scared, like she goin bolt. I can tell they’s been fightin bout somethin, and somehow I know it’s cuz o me.

“Naw, naw... I just wanted to...”
he starts, clearing his throat. “I just wanted to say thank you. For showin’ me the church an’ all. And I wanted to give you this.”

He reaches into his pocket, and I can feel Kathy stiffen next to me. He fishes out a wrinkled dollar bill. “Isn’t much, but maybe you can buy somethin’ with it for the basket.”

“That’s very generous of you, Anthony,” I say, taking the dollar, while Kathy finally relaxes. “Thank you.”

Anthony shrugs and slouches back down toward the bus stop. I close the door, and Kathy scurries to her desk. I again wonder what must be going through that boy’s mind. I hold his dollar in my hand, incapable of measuring its worth.

But now I gotta explain myself I guess, but I ain’t so great at doin that. I ain’t ever really talked to people like this before. They like from a different planet from me. White people. Shit.

Still, this lady shown me somethin, that even if we different an shit, I dunno, she felt like a friend. Like a real friend who don’t look at you and judge you, but just helps you when you need it.

So, that’s why I came back. To tell her thanks for bein a good lady, a good friend. And then, yeah, I don’t know, just to prove that I’m good too, I guess, I give her the last dollar I got on me. I dunno how I’m gettin all the way back to Anacostia with no money, but I guess I figure it out. Hell, I walk back if I have to. Ain’t no big deal.

Counting Cards

I sit at a \$5-minimum blackjack table in Circus Circus, a past-its-prime casino 3 miles north of the more glamorous places like Luxor and Bellagio. It's not the worst of the 47 casinos on the Strip, but it's far from the best. They haven't replaced the carpets in years. My last time at this place was 110 days ago, and I'm not sure they've even cleaned the carpets since then. Cigarette burns pock the floor like divots left by thoughtless golfers. Each burn mark – I count 43 between the entrance and my table – is a souvenir left behind by some unlucky fool stupid enough to think he could walk in here and win. The place is a swampy soup of manmade odors, and no matter how much oxygen they pump in, the air hangs heavy over me. I swim in it. A symphony of slot machine beeps and roulette wheel clicks, of bells and clinking glasses and coins spitting into metal pay-out trays swirls about me. There are no clocks here, and even though I do not wear a watch, I know it is precisely 5:27 in the morning. I have been playing all night.

The dealer's hands fly around the red felt table, cards flipping and flapping, a flash of hearts and spades, kings and queens. I like watching her hands. Her fingers are long and nimble, nails tastefully painted. No ring. I glance at her nametag. Tammy, Bowling Green KY. I'd like to ponder her, to think about what brought her out to Las Vegas. I want to introduce myself: "Cal, Detroit MI." But the cards keep coming, and I have to focus.

She has burned through more than 3/4 of the 6-deck shoe in front of her, and I know how many of each card remains. She passes me a 6 and a jack, while she shows a 5. Everyone at the table assumes she's hiding a face card, that she has 15. The fat man to my left is happy with his 19, counting on her to bust. The drunk college kids on my right are too stupid to know what to do

with their hands. But I have been counting, and I know that her 5 is only the 4th we have seen, meaning there are still around 20 left in the 75 cards remaining. Preposterously high.

“Hit me,” the kid to my right slurs after his friend goes bust. He’s got a 13 showing, and when she passes him a 5, I click off another number in my internal counter. The odds are still in my favor. I can feel another 5 just under her hand. She is looking at me now, I know, though I refuse to make eye contact with her. I tap the table, and she slides me my 5. I have 21. The fat man sticks, and she flips over her hidden card to reveal a smart-looking queen, then turns over the deciding card: yet another 5. Her 20 beats his 19 and frat boy’s 18. She passes me 4 green chips, and the next round starts.

I should have been a mathematician. Numbers pour through my head like raindrops. Sometimes, they’re a summer storm, brilliant and ferocious, lasting only moments but leaving me drenched in their wake. At other times, the numbers in my head are a slow trickle, preventing me from falling asleep. For no apparent reason I find myself performing complicated mental equations, attempting to figure out the odds of random things, like being born on a Thursday morning in a year divisible by 3. (1 in 42.)

To me, it’s like putting together a piece of music, all those numbers flying about like misplaced A-sharps and B-flats, and it’s up to me to pluck them out of the air and make sense of them all. I imagine Barber must have felt the same way when he composed his *Adagio for Strings*. The notes were right there in front of him, and all he had to do was put them in the right order, and let the violinists breathe the music to life.

Sometimes I just can’t stop counting. I count plane trips I’ve made, and cities I’ve been to. I count women I find attractive. I examine the numbers on license plates of cars passing by, making up games for myself involving their combinations. I know I have a compulsive counting

disorder, but it doesn't bother me anymore. Most people who know me – or knew me – consider me a freak, someone lost in his own head all the time, someone incapable of carrying on a conversation because all I can focus on are things like how many times someone uses a particular word in regular speech. Once a girlfriend broke up with me because I told her she used “essentially” an average of every 14th word, and I felt that was too frequent. It became a discordant note in the mathematics of our relationship, and I felt obligated to tell her. She screamed at me for, essentially, my lack of sensitivity. She was not the first woman to slam her door on me on the way out. She could not understand that every time she said that word it was as if she were banging a gong inside my head.

It has made me unpopular and friendless, but I have found 1 way to use my problem to my advantage. I count cards.

I win the last 4 rounds of the shoe. I'm up a sublimely even \$1,000 on the night, and it's time to cash out before her pit boss figures out what I've been doing. I toss the dealer \$25, enough for her to be happy, not too much that she'll remember me, I think, and I head to the cage.

I'm counting my winnings at the cage, Barber's lilting string music flowing through my muscles, when I receive a tap on the shoulder. I turn around to face what I know is coming. I must have played 1 shoe too many. He's a big man with a brush cut and a brown mustache. He wears a flimsy black vest and a nametag. Brock, Chicago IL. Stop the music.

“Sir, I have to ask you to leave the casino immediately,” he whispers. “And don't ever come back.”

Pit bosses don't like to cause a scene. But they will if they have to. I have been caught counting cards enough in the past to know there is no use in arguing. I nod and head for the exit.

Quick and quiet, no hassle. If I were in a movie, they would drag me to some dark room and tie me to a chair. There would be 3 of them – a guy from the security firm, and 2 former boxers juiced on steroids and amphetamines. The boxers would take turns mashing fat, gold-adorned fists into my face, and I would smile at them with each punch, blood filling the cracks between every tooth in my mouth. Eventually they would let me go, tossing me out like garbage into a back alley.

But that's the movies. In real life – for a guy like me who uses his talent to make a little money – they don't bother with it. \$1,000 in a night isn't worth the hassle. And honestly, tonight's take is high for me. Even with me counting every card in a 6-shoe deck, the odds don't usually swing that much in my favor. 20 5s in the last 75 cards? Do the math on that one. (I have.) That just doesn't happen. Tonight is special.

It is the 20th time I have been booted out, and I always go quietly. 2 beefy security agents in maize-colored blazers follow 3 paces behind me, past the rows of flashing, beeping slot machines and their blue-haired and balding clients. 84 slot machines, 37 unoccupied. I do not acknowledge the guards as I step back out into the remnants of a cool desert night, heading south on the Strip.

"That was some nice counting back there."

It is a female voice from behind me. I don't turn around. I try to ignore it, keep walking, but then there's a tap on my back.

"Hey, I'm talking to you!"

Annoyed, I wheel around and come face to face with the dealer from my last table. She has removed her nametag, but I remember. Tammy, Bowling Green KY. She takes a cigarette and lighter out of her purse. She looks so cool as she slips a cigarette between her fingers. In 1

motion both cigarette and lighter fly to her mouth, and she flicks open the flame. She takes a long drag in, and I watch the tip of the cigarette glow orange with her inhalation. I think I hear violins. But I can't be sure. I ask her what she wants from me.

She holds the smoke in, way down somewhere in the nether regions of her lungs, and then she lets it out in a laser-like gray line that holds form a moment before dispersing into the still chilly air. "How about a coffee?" she asks.

I know I should leave. I've heard casino security firms sometimes plant agents behind tables then use them to root out people like me. I try not to get too paranoid. They can't care enough to come after me. I'm nothing. But the other possibility, that this girl actually likes me, seems even more far-fetched. I realize the odds aren't great, but I've had a good night so far.

5 minutes later we're in a café at the Stardust. "You're too obvious, you know. I could tell from when you sat down that you were counting cards."

I sip a beer and look around. 13 women in the bar, not counting the servers. 28 men, not counting the bartenders. "Thanks. I'll try harder next time."

"What's your name?"

"Look, I'm sorry," I say. "I've actually got to go. Enjoy your drink."

But she won't let me leave. "27."

I turn back. "What?"

"You leave, there'll be 27 men left in the bar. Not counting the bartenders. That's over a 2-to-1 ratio for me. I gotta admit, I like those odds."

She smiles. I see now. She is like me. *Adagio*.

"I'm Cal," I say, almost adding "Detroit MI."

"I didn't turn you in, you know. Brock was watching you all night."

“It’s all right. I’ve been kicked out before. It’ll happen again.” I am long resigned to my fate, driving a highway stretching to infinity, a number I can never reach but one I must inexorably count my way towards. She senses my pain, sees it in the 7 permanent furrows already scrawled across my forehead.

“Doesn’t have to be that way, you know,” she says.

“You could lose your job just for talking with me. You understand that?”

But she says she doesn’t care about her job, because if she wanted to, she could make a lot more money doing what I do. Lots of people count cards, she says, but most just analyze the hands dealt, use a numbering system. They don’t remember the past and don’t think about what’s coming next. They only see the present. They get this glazed look over their eyes, and they bore her. She could see that I was counting every single card, that I knew what had been played, and what was to come. She tells me I have vision.

The sun has come up, and I’m tired but don’t want to sleep. Neither does Tammy. In an open-air lot 3 ½ blocks away we find her car, a baby-blue 1960 Ford Galaxie Sunliner. She is a perfect car – big and brash, but not ostentatious, as the models from the ‘50s were. I run my hands along her chrome fenderline and caress her small tailfins. The top is already down, and Tammy hops into the front passenger seat. I give her a quizzical look, and she tosses me her keys.

“Just drive.”

I hesitate for a moment, wondering what I’m getting myself into with this girl from Bowling Green KY who has well-manicured hands, a heavenly vehicle, and an obsession for numbers. Things like this don’t happen to me. To anybody. I look at Tammy, and she is looking

up at me with eyes a shade darker than her car's paint job, and I try to calculate the odds of a moment so perfect. I cannot.

As Tammy waits for me to jump in next to her, I start counting. I can't help it. I look around the parking lot and count red cars. 17. Seams in the leather of the front seat of the Sunliner: 28. I run my thumb along the grooves of the car key in my hand, and as I count she's starting to look a little pissed. She'll end up hating me, I'm sure. And if she's really like me, I'll probably hate her too. It'll never work. I need to give her back her keys.

"Over 1,100," she says, just as I get ready to place the keys on her dashboard and leave her forever.

"What?"

"Casinos in the U.S.," she answers. "We can go anywhere, Cal. We can make a little quick money when we have to. We don't need a lot. You and I, we can do whatever we want. You just have to let it happen."

"I don't even know you," I say.

"Well, here's your chance to find out." She bites her lower lip, and I think I see desperation in her eyes. I realize she's been looking for someone who could understand her as long as I have looked for someone who could do the same for me. Maybe it won't work out, and we'll end up driving each other crazy as we count the number of times the other goes to the bathroom in a week or how many cigarettes the other smokes per day. And maybe I'm not ready for a co-dependent relationship between too numerically obsessed people.

I run my hand along the rounded corner of the windshield. The chrome is starting to warm in the morning sun. I look at this girl again, and I keep calling her a girl, but neither of us

is that young anymore. Wrinkles are creeping up under her eyes, and maybe she's thinking this is the last chance she's going to get for some semblance of happiness.

2 hours ago, I was in my little world, counting my cards, trying to block out the sounds of the casino, the electronic bleeps, the coins falling in aluminum payout trays, the croupiers' "no more bets" calls, the collective buzz of 1,000 insomniacs, partiers and addicts. Tammy, Bowling Green KY, with the nimble fingers and blue eyes, was a necessary part of the din.

Now she wants to separate herself from that world and enter mine. Because she thinks our worlds are the same. And I am still standing outside her car, and she is still looking up at me with a look that says that if I don't get in the car with her right now, she might just break.

I make a decision. It doesn't matter what comes next, I tell myself. I need to extend this moment as long as it can last. My hand reaches for the door handle, and I press the button in with my thumb. The door swings open, and I slide inside. This girl I don't even know yet smiles at me, and I turn the key in the ignition. The radio's on. It's not Barber. Some hillbilly song, a different kind of music. But it'll do.

We speed out of town, and we are in the desert. An infinite stretch of land and sky enfolds us, and I can't help it: I start counting the cacti, the clouds, the hawks circling overhead. I calculate the days I've been alone, the minutes I've been with her. My brain is hyperventilating, and she senses it, because she stretches her left arm toward me and runs those long fingers through my hair. I take my eyes off the road a moment, look over at her. She laughs.

Vita

Stephen Leonard is originally from Washington, DC, and currently lives in Paris with his wife Odile and his son Luke.